



Bibliophile Princess

6

The Guiding Light of Hope

Author: Yui
Illustrator: Satsuki Sheena





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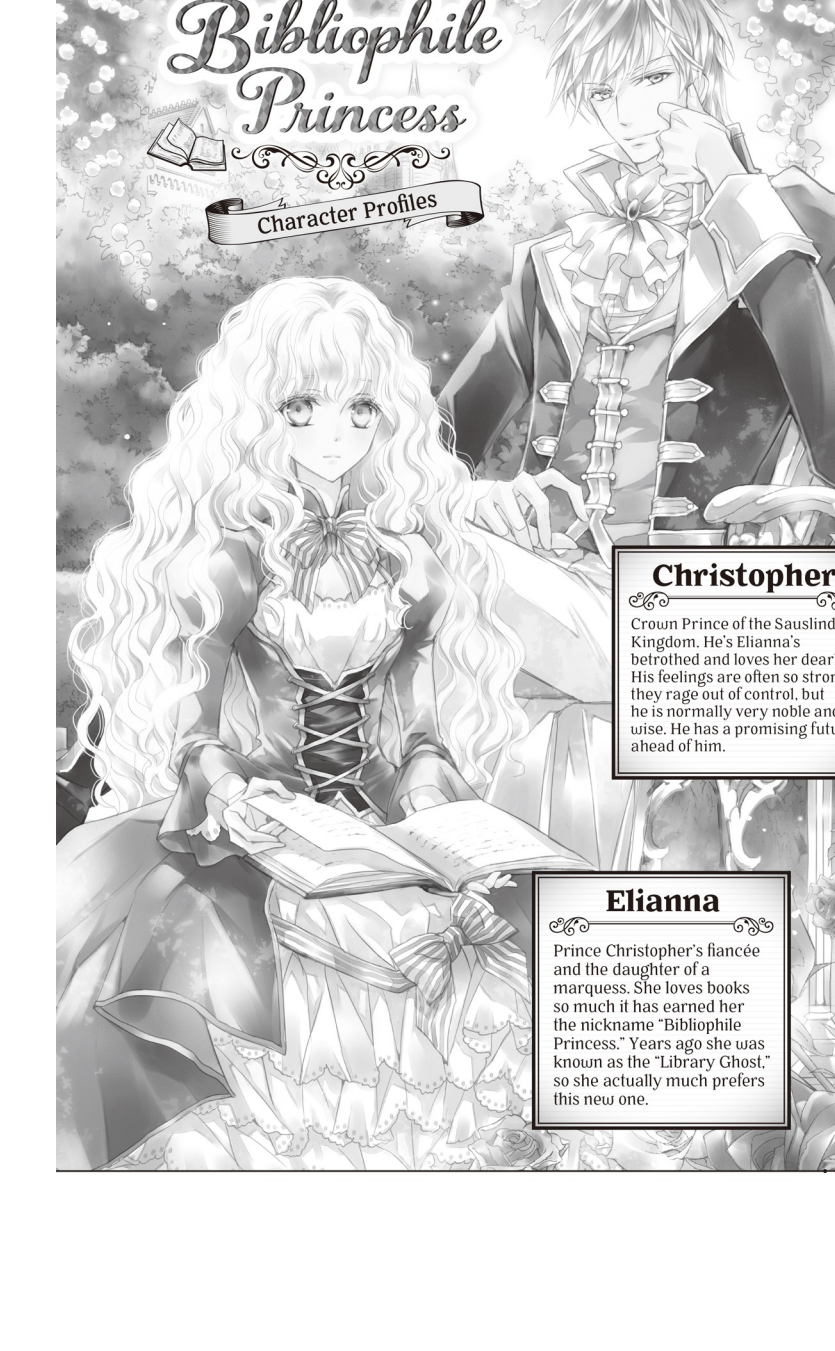
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Character Profiles

Christopher

Crown Prince of the Sauslind Kingdom. He's Elianna's betrothed and loves her dearly. His feelings are often so strong they rage out of control, but he is normally very noble and wise. He has a promising future ahead of him.

Elianna

Prince Christopher's fiancée and the daughter of a marquess. She loves books so much it has earned her the nickname "Bibliophile Princess." Years ago she was known as the "Library Ghost," so she actually much prefers this new one.



Alexei

Heir to an earldom and the prince's reliable right-hand man. He is equally frigid toward any women who approach, which has earned him the epithet "Ice Scion."

Glen

Part of the prince's inner circle. He's a knight in the imperial guard as well as the prince's bodyguard. Often finds himself the victim of the prince's misdirected frustration and anger.



Irvin

The fifth prince of the kingdom of Maldura. His mother was born in Sauslind, so his position is a complicated one.



Alan

Master court musician that serves the prince. Per His Highness's orders, he is secretly shadowing Elianna for her protection.

Lilia

Elianna's cousin. She currently works at the royal palace as Elianna's attendant.

Series Dictionary

Bernstein Family

A line famous for its generations of book lovers. Because of their lack of interest in political power, they are generally regarded as a weaker house, but they are secretly referred to as Sauslind's Brain. A very important family. When the family last appeared in the public eye and advised Sauslind's previous king's, the country flourished.

Maldura

A neighboring country of Sauslind. Known as a war-mongering state.

Miseral Dukedom

An ally to the southwest of Sauslind. Known as a maritime nation.

The Ashen Nightmare

An illness that is once again ravaging Sauslind. Currently, there is no cure for it.

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Chapter 1: Foreign Temptation

Twilight enveloped the land as the sun began to sink over the horizon. Coughs could be heard from all directions. Some were softer and lighter, while others were more noticeable and pronounced, seeming to echo. The vast space of the assembly hall was dominated by anguished breathing and a melancholy atmosphere. Even the air was musty. Everyone knew that anyone who entered here would never leave—not alive, anyway.

This was the Ralshen Region of Sauslind Kingdom, where the Urma Mines were the main source of people's livelihood. A town rested at the foot of the mountain, where the miners and their families lived. It was a place that saw all sorts of people and merchants going to and fro. Although the town was called Modzth, few referred to it by that name. The Urma Mines were what this area was famous for, so for most, this was merely "the town at the foot of the mountain."

As a major town, it had a respectably large town hall. The mining industry here was also of crucial importance to the realm, so both the regional lord and the top brass at the capital had dispatched officials to oversee things. Those same officials now found themselves secluded in a cramped space after the citizens of the town had taken up arms.

The coughing remained incessant even after night fell. Sadly, there were too few people present trying to alleviate or otherwise offer aid to those suffering from these symptoms. The only ones present even making an attempt were a single individual who'd taken on the role of doctor and a select few who'd chosen to follow that ambition. Their numbers thinned as the days pressed on.

The doctor who'd been looking after the patients fell ill with the Ashen Nightmare, and those who'd acted as the doctor's assistants began to exhibit symptoms themselves. No one could be blamed for wondering if it would be their turn next. Naturally, many escaped under the cover of night. Not a soul left behind could blame them for it either.

The assembly hall began to be known as "the Final Stop." As the name implied, it was the final place people went before they left this world for the next.

In places where Ryzanity had taken root, it was taught that people shouldn't resist whatever trials God set before them, so some people genuinely believed they were supposed to accept whatever happened

as God's will. This led some to view the dead as pious believers for having obeyed God. Still, it was also a natural part of human nature to want to help those whose lives could be saved.

Outside, the snow was unrelenting. Talks continued with those who'd risen up. Day by day, the number of infected increased. People who were still in good health made a run for it, while the ones who remained behind saw no happy ending in sight or any reports that would signify impactful change was on its way. As the seriousness of the situation mounted, people understandably began to criticize the person serving as representative—me.

"Raqqa, I'm really starting to think chasing off the regional lord's envoy wasn't the best idea," said one person.

Another chimed in with more depressing news. "We've been holed up in here for over seven days now. We're going to start running low on food soon."

"Doesn't help that the road is blocked by snow drifts," mumbled another, implicitly suggesting that perhaps all their efforts were going to be for naught.

"It's a bit late for that now," snapped a stern voice. "The regional lord's envoy was just a hollow mouthpiece sent to smooth things over and shut us up. It's not like they brought medicine and doctors along with them. They just want to stop the people from rebelling and pretend none of it ever happened."

"Exactly," someone agreed. "Everyone knows the upper crust always abandons Ralshen when it suits them. If no one had risen up, they'd have turned a blind eye like usual. This place is forsaken land, as far as they're concerned."

The people who spoke loudest grew increasingly impatient and indignant because they were the ones whose families had been infected. This prompted everyone else who'd given their negative opinions on the situation to keep their mouths shut; they didn't know if they and their loved ones might be next.

Even before the New Year came, many at the foot of the mountain had caught colds. There were always years like that, so people had remained optimistic at the start. It was only once they realized that this was a life-threatening plague—the Ashen Nightmare—that things took a sudden turn.

Those of a certain age could still remember how horrific it had been when it had last visited sixteen years ago. The spread had been rampant, claiming one life after another. People had begun to disappear from each other's lives—a neighborhood acquaintance, the local shop owner, and even close family. One day a child might play with another only for both of them to be gone the next. As the community's population dwindled, leaving few alive, the pungent

odor of death had hung like a thick curtain over the city.

I never want to see that happen again. That was a sentiment shared by every member of the town.

Perhaps an uprising was inevitable in this situation. Even if the townspeople summoned doctors and herbalists from the surrounding areas to provide assistance, everyone already knew the path they were headed down. Their town was far from the capital and well removed from any major highways, nestled in the heart of the kingdom. No matter how immediate any help was, things would still be like they were before. This would once again become a land of the dead.

Word had spread all the way to Mt. Urma that the capital had the pomelo fruit, which was effective against the plague. We weren't asking for all of it to be handed over, but if we didn't receive some supply of it, then the afflicted would have no hope of survival. We knew our methods were violent, but last time we'd reacted too late and lost too many lives in the process. There wasn't time to make polite requests.

I, Raqqa Arkto, acting as a representative of the town's miners, rose up alongside my comrades and encouraged those gripped with fear to take up arms with us. We resorted to unsavory means to accomplish our goal—storming the town hall and arresting the officials stationed there. It was an anticlimactic act of rebellion, considering how easily we were able to gain control. Part of that was because the officials were so caught off guard that they had no idea how to react. Maybe some even sympathized with us for having to resort to such violent means.

Those who'd weakly resolved themselves to our cause clenched their fists and tried to talk themselves up about the decision we'd made. My fellow miners were more committed, perhaps because most were naturally short-tempered with a propensity for letting their fists do all the talking.

"Raqqa. It's no use talkin' to those envoys. We oughta send someone directly to the capital, dontcha think?"

"Yeah, but the capital's busy preparin' for war, right? Doubt those guys'd be worried 'bout a town like ours, here in the middle of nowhere. It's no skin off their backs what happens to us. I say we send someone to the regional lord's manor instead."

I could understand where they were coming from as they argued back and forth. His Majesty in the capital city of Saoura had fallen ill as well, and word had spread far and wide that this was Maldura's doing. We were on the cusp of open war. Even the men here with me, as ignorant as they were of national politics, could tell that sending someone to petition for aid wasn't likely to produce any results.

The former earl's predecessor was still alive and living at the

regional lord's mansion, however. Even if the current lord had proved undependable, the people still had great trust in his grandfather, who'd fought alongside us to protect our lands during the last great conflict. That was why many proposed going there to demand assistance directly. Moreover, two people close to the royal family were stationed there currently: a young man in line for the throne, who was the son of a duke and the king's elder sister, and the current crown prince's betrothed. Maybe people thought we might have some luck if we pleaded with them.

That plan had some issues, though; it had been over a week since we had commenced our uprising. We lacked doctors and medical assistants as well as medicine and provisions. The royal family was making no move to alleviate our situation. That was the reality we were faced with.

A profound but not entirely unexpected disappointment fell over all of us. We all knew it would probably be futile to hope for anything from our kingdom's royalty. That was precisely why I resolved myself and opened my mouth to speak, drawing everyone's attention in the process.

"We waited until now in the hopes that aid had been delayed because of the snow, but our sick are only increasing by the day, and the envoys that came offered nothing but empty words. If it wasn't clear before, it is now. The regional lord and the royal family have no intention whatsoever of saving any of us."

A ripple of bitter, angry agreement rose from the gathered group. I surveyed their faces before continuing.

"The reason the regional lord and his people are so flippant is because they don't understand yet that we're serious. As soon as this blizzard lets up, we'll take those officials as hostages to make our negotiations. If they refuse to listen, we can always throw the mayor and the officials in with the sick and dying."

Those more half-hearted about our cause audibly gulped. I was suggesting we purposefully expose healthy individuals to the plague. I saw the resistance—the urge to argue that my proposal was immoral—on my friends' faces, but I returned their looks with one of resolve, having already made peace with my decision. I knew full well there was no coming back from this.

"We're going to show the royal family—the whole country—just how serious we are."

Several strong voices rang out in agreement, their spirits encouraged. I scanned everyone's faces as I reaffirmed my own commitment to this course. I wasn't going to let my people reexperience the same horrors. I would do anything to make sure that didn't happen. If it came to it, I was willing to stoop to any low

necessary.

As I curled my hands into fight fists, the roar of the blizzard grew stronger, as if responding.

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The blizzard outside began to rage, the howl of the wind echoing through the room. A single voice spoke, quiet but firm.

“Elianna. I want to steal you away.”

Those intrusive black eyes stared at me, his foreign scent invading my senses. I, Elianna Bernstein, was engaged to Sauslind’s crown prince, but this man was trying to tempt me. His invitation sounded sweet, especially right now when my heart was in tatters.

At the same time, I remembered something I read in a book once, about the roar of the snow. It could be so deafeningly loud, like the rumblings of a beast, that it would scare travelers who went up north. A person could be walking straight toward their destination, but the moment they began to hear the howling of strange voices in their ear, their sense of direction would vanish. They would find themselves pummeled by strong winds and blinded by the heavy snowfall. The drifts blocking their path would sap whatever strength they had left in their legs, and before they knew it, they’d find themselves in the belly of the white beast. With no landmarks to guide their way and having been chilled to the bone, they’d shiver and shake as their heart—their very will to trek on—crumbled inside of them.

I pictured myself as that traveler at this very moment.

I’ve done enough. I put in plenty of effort already. I faced numerous hardships, overcame the trials and tribulations that challenged me, and fought to my very limits to come this far. Grandpa Teddy has been so precious to me from a young age. Even though he’d made demands of me to leave the prince, we’d managed to reclaim the mutual trust we’d once enjoyed...only for him to die trying to protect me. Jean was someone I thought I could place my faith in, and he turned on me. Furya’s Jar promised to be our light in the dark, and it was swallowed in flames. Even the person I mentally depended on more than anyone else, someone so precious and irreplaceable to me, seems to be lost amid the raging blizzard in my heart.

The storm was so powerful that it even stole any energy I might have had to question why this was happening. Like the traveler, my heart had shattered, and the terrifyingly tempting mirage in front of me was too captivating to ignore. It was a beautiful illusion, one people said could only be discovered as one teetered between the brink of life and death.

The man before me was the very vision of the legend written in the books; his beauty was otherworldly, and his eyes, though cold as

ice, were so gentle and sweet as they invited me to indulge myself in dreams. I knew all they promised was true despair, a frozen future, but most people lacked the will to resist such temptations.

As I mumbled something inaudible under my breath, the man in front of me blinked. The way I was reflected in his black eyes was almost enchanting enough to draw me in, but their effect weakened the more he continued to blink. I found the courage to repeat what I had tried to say before.

“We must contact Lord Alexei.”

He was blinking so fast now that the fluttering of his eyelashes almost seemed audible, and his black eyes were staring straight at me, scrutinizing me. The magic spell his exotic appearance and vulnerability had cast over me was broken.

“Elianna Bernstein,” he called my name, as if groping for answers.

“Yes?”

When I answered back, he peered deep into my eyes again. His hand continued to linger on my skin, finding its way to my cheek and pinching it. The reflection I saw of myself—still disguised as a boy, of course—in Prince Irvin’s eyes looked almost comical now. That did nothing to dissuade me from staring right back at him.

Prince Irvin expelled a heavy sigh. “Why,” he said, sounding utterly mystified, “are you mentioning the name of a man other than the prince right now...”

His full name was Irvin Orlanza, and he was the fifth prince of Maldura, the very country with which Sauslind was rumored to be on the brink of war. He had sun-kissed skin and a casual posture that seemed to hint at his sarcastic nature. His menacing countenance distinctly separated him from other aristocrats, but he still retained enough grace about him so as not to appear crude. His hair was jet black, dark enough to be swallowed in the shadows of night, but despite being the same color, his eyes could heat like burning charcoal when filled with emotion. An exotic scent hung in the air around him.

The reason we found ourselves teetering on the edge of war with his nation was that word had spread that his people were responsible for the Ashen Nightmare—the plague of death—rampantly spreading throughout our realm. There were even claims they’d infected His Majesty. The lead suspect of these crimes was Prince Irvin’s elder brother, Prince Reglisse. The pro-war faction had taken him into custody at the capital, making the situation even more volatile.

Prince Irvin’s wry smile gave no hint that he was at all concerned by the severity of our circumstances, however, and after breathing out another sigh, he said, “I was planning to steal you away immediately if you spoke the prince’s name, you know.”

A chill ran down my spine, and I swallowed hard.

Prince Irvin smiled the same way he always did as he resumed pinching my cheek. "I bet you're actually really at a loss right now, aren't ya? I've got a pretty good idea as to why you're not used to guys trying to make passes at you. Being able to corrupt someone so innocent from start to finish does sound pretty amusing. Maybe I should kidnap you after all?"

"Um," I tried to respond, though my voice came out distorted due to his refusal to release my cheek. Prince Irvin snickered, as if he was perfectly aware of what he was doing.

I was surprised as well that I'd managed to regain my composure, but the roaring of the storm outside had reminded me of the stories I'd heard and helped me cool my head. Or perhaps it wasn't the stories, but rather the spirit who appeared in them that so reminded me of Lord Alexei; they called this spirit a "snow woman," a seductive mirage with eyes so cold they could freeze you to the core—not unlike what I'd experienced with Lord Alexei. Perhaps it was the memory of that gaze that brought me out of my stupor.

I lifted my hand and pushed Prince Irvin's away. Staring straight up at him, I asked, "Why?"

His brows raised a fraction.

I found him truly perplexing. His country had been at war with Sauslind a number of times in the past. His mother had once been a woman of high noble status here until her father's plot to betray the crown had cost her and her family everything; she had lost her name and house and been driven from her homeland. Not a soul had cared where fate took her after that.

I was the one responsible for uncovering his mother's accomplishments during the course of a certain incident last autumn, but I didn't get the sense that that was the only reason for his fascination with me. I suspected there was another reason at play, and I was going to ask about it.

"Is this because my house is called Sauslind's Brain?"

The periods when the Bernsteins served the kings of Sauslind were remembered for how prosperous the kingdom had been. Sauslind's Brain was a hidden name our family had long carried since, but I knew Prince Irvin had already discovered our secret. Mentioning it wasn't my attempt to act conceited about my family or house; I brought it up because I knew the first thing to naturally pop into a person's head was how they could make use of this information. I suspected the reason he wanted to take me with him was for Maldura's benefit.

He blinked again, and a chuckle slipped past his lips. "Yes, it's true that Maldura is one of the poorer countries among those on the continent. So that's what you think my motive is in trying to seduce

you, hm?"

I faltered, unable to nod.

"Oh, right," Prince Irvin went on, "that reminds me. You mentioned the name of someone from the prince's inner circle just now. Why?"

Lord Alexei Strasser was known throughout the land not simply because he was in the line of succession but also because he was one of the prince's closest confidantes. Hesitant though I was, I began to explain the reason I thought it so imperative for us to contact Lord Alexei.

"The region has split their manpower trying to search for me, from what I hear. What is more important now is to secure those infected and send people to the town at the foot of Mt. Urma. Much of their population is showing symptoms, and they're in cramped quarters there. More than anything else, they need people there to provide assistance."

"Aha." His eyes danced with amusement, much like they always did. "But isn't it perfectly natural for them to have split their forces searching for you? You do remember there are people after your life right now, don't you? I thought the whole reason you've been disguising yourself was because of that. Or am I mistaken?"

General Theoden Bakula had been the first to point out to me that our information was being leaked. After all that had transpired, it seemed there could be no mistake that Jean was the culprit behind the leak, though that didn't change the fact that I was still being targeted even now. Contacting Lord Alexei would both confirm my survival as well as my current location.

I chewed on my lip.

When I first made the decision to disguise myself, it was because I was under the belief that these people were targeting me for my status. I knew some would be worried for my safety, but I'd committed myself to this course out of fear of there being another attack and because I felt a sense of responsibility as the prince's betrothed to do so. Prince Irvin was right to be concerned. If anything were to happen to me here and now, it could be pinned on Maldura. That would very likely serve as the final push to convince Sauslind to commit to war. Meanwhile, Mabel and Lord Alan had been charged with protecting me, and as their mistress, I was obligated to keep them out of danger as well.

The look in Prince Irvin's eyes almost seemed reproachful, as if he thought I was underestimating the importance of my own position. His gaze practically penetrated my very soul. The unspoken accusation was that I'd been thoughtless for suggesting I would forsake my own life for the good of the people.

I returned his gaze, knowing I couldn't run from it or the questions he'd posed. "Some things must take priority over others. There are people suffering in the throes of illness, waiting for someone to help them. I am perfectly alive and well, and though there may still be assassins out for my life, I can run from them on my own two feet. This is no time to be wasting manpower on pointless searches."

"You being safe and sound isn't going to magically change public distrust and the bad reputation you've gained in the meantime. You realize that, right?"

The words I'd heard earlier echoed in my ears. "*She probably got scared by the Ashen Nightmare and took off.*"

I shook my head. "That's a nonissue. What should come first is sending people to those who need succor. We need to ensure people don't lose hope."

The best way to sustain that hope was to prove the hand of mercy would come to them without fail, that they hadn't been abandoned. There was nothing else I could do for them right now except that.

Prince Irvin's piercing eyes narrowed as he studied me. "At the rate you're going, that saint lady in the capital who's gaining so much popularity might end up stealing your position as the crown prince's betrothed. You sure you're okay with that?"

His words provoked an immediate protest from me, the emotion in my voice sounding eerily close to anger.

"What connection does my reputation have to the peoples' well-being? There are people out there—whole families, even—who are sick and suffering. Who holds the title of crown princess right now is entirely irrelevant to them."

My hands curled into tight, trembling fists.

The phantom from sixteen years ago, the Ashen Nightmare, had resurfaced. Its resurgence was causing pandemonium throughout the realm once more. During its first appearance, my father had forbidden me from stepping outside, so I had seen nothing of the horrors that befell Sauslind. Even so, for as young as I was, I wasn't entirely ignorant of the changes in my surroundings.

One day, the maids who'd been looking after me would suddenly change. Gardeners and manservants would disappear. A heavy atmosphere pervaded our home. Whispers tinged with anxiety could be heard here and there throughout our halls. The time I looked forward to the most every day was when my mother would read to me, but even that was abruptly stolen away.

Amid the terror and apprehension that filled my every waking hour back then, it was all I could do to pray my mother would recover. If someone had come to me mentioning some nonsense about the reputation of the next crown princess or who was being

considered for that position, I wouldn't have given them the time of day. If anything, I would have been incensed that they were wasting time on such frivolity.

"Lady Pharmia and the seat of the crown princess are issues that I must see to personally. Nonetheless, this is neither the time nor place to discuss such controversies."

There were people waiting to be saved, people suffering as the shadow of death hung over them.

My chest swelled with an inner strength I didn't know I had as I put my thoughts into words. This was no time to be losing my nerve—no time to curl up and cry. As the blinding blizzard raged outside, there were people locked up somewhere out there waiting for someone to come save them.

My leg muscles tightened as I started to push myself back to my feet. Before I was even fully standing, the man in front of me let another chuckle slip. This one was warmer than before. I flinched, taken aback.

Prince Irvin suppressed a smile as he grabbed one of my hands. "That's why," he said.

Puzzled, I tilted my head to the side.

Amusement danced in his eyes as he looked at me. "You look so weak and helpless on the outside, but the moment it seems you've been broken, shattered to pieces like fragile porcelain, you always manage to stand back up on your own two feet. I won't lie and say there's no value in making use of Sauslind's Brain, but...what draws me to you is your perseverance. Your fortitude."

Well, I'm a bit offended by the way you've worded that, my lord. Those certainly don't sound like the words one would use to compliment a lady.

I pulled a face at him, and his stern features instantly softened.

"You should pick me, Elianna," he said.

Again, as had happened so many times already in his presence today, my pulse quickened. The hand that gripped mine was foreign, covered in calluses he'd earned by wielding his sword so frequently. The strength I felt in them, however, was not altogether unfamiliar, reminding me of someone else I knew.

"You know what you gotta do right this moment. But as for your situation with the prince, who's gonna care if you decide to blow that off? It'd be one less thing on your plate to deal with."

I blinked at him. As those black eyes gazed back at me, they cast an illusion, reflecting as pure and white as freshly fallen snow—so soft and inviting.

"If you claim you've annulled your engagement with Sauslind's prince in favor of being betrothed to a prince from Maldura, the

assassins after your life would have no choice but to pull back for now. If anything were to happen to my fiancée here, political responsibility would fall to Sauslind. And anyway, these assassins would have no reason to target you if you're not the crown princess. Let's be honest; the reason they're after you is because you're going to be the future queen and you made all that talk about cultivating friendly relations with Maldura."

He has a point, I thought to myself, unable to entirely deny what he was saying. If I were to shed my mantle as the prince's betrothed, I'd become an ordinary noble lady. The loss of influence that would cost me would make it more difficult to outstretch the hand of mercy to those currently suffering, but it would have the added benefit of deterring my would-be murderers. This would also allow me to fulfill my obligations to Mabel and Lord Alan, helping keep them safe. And, although it would be a roundabout way of doing it, it would also safeguard friendly relations between Maldura and Sauslind as well. It was a different path to realizing the dream of peace I'd once spoken of.

I was still half-crouched as I stood there, causing Prince Irvin to crane his neck to peer down at me. My voice filled with resolve as I said, "Lord Irvin." I stared directly into his face as I spoke. He remained silent, but the wry twist of his bold and fearless smile answered my summons. I scrutinized him, trying to confirm whether he had the resolve to see this through—to help me pursue what I thought was the best course at this point in time.

"What would..." I began to say, and though I finished my sentence thereafter, his entire expression froze. I suspected his lack of a reaction indicated that my words hadn't gotten through to him. I tried repeating what I'd just said again. "What would I be charged, Lord Irvin?"

"Charged with...?" he echoed back, seeming to assume I was referring to being charged with a crime.

Sensing that my intention to negotiate wasn't properly being conveyed, I decided to rephrase myself instead. "Lord Irvin Orlanza, you have been cooperating with us for a common purpose up until this point, but I would like to officially hire your services. What fees do you charge as a bodyguard?"

His jaw dropped as he stared at me, dumbfounded. His impervious smirk was gone, and without it, he looked strangely vulnerable. I was so accustomed to the cocky facade he always kept up that, as rude as I realized it was, I couldn't help but smile. This was, nonetheless, supposed to be a transaction. I chased away my own emotions and let my face harden, recalling what Queen Henrietta had taught me about negotiating.

Prince Irvin, meanwhile, put a hand over his mouth and started mumbling to himself. "You looked so serious, and the way you put it reminded me of some filthy rich madam who funnels all her money into her pastimes. I was sure you were soliciting me for... Forget it." He shook his head, as if trying to drive away such idle thoughts. Once he'd composed himself, he fixed his gaze on me again. "I proposed to you just a moment ago. Why are we now talking about you hiring me as a bodyguard?"

Oh dear. The words nearly slipped past my lips, but I managed to stop myself. I hadn't expected him to say that. His proposal alone wouldn't have been enough for us to turn this entire situation back around. Nevertheless, it seemed Prince Irvin had been confident that I would agree. Perhaps that was due to his own innate confidence in himself. Or maybe this was what Duchess Rosalia had been referencing on one of our trips here, warning me not to shatter a man's pride if I could help it, as "adorable and fragile as it is." Unfortunately, I felt trying to be ladylike in my response would only be disrespectful.

Um, let's see, I thought to myself. But before I could contemplate a way to respond, Prince Irvin somehow beat me to it.

"Oh, I get it," he said, looking utterly annoyed. "Look, the last thing I want is for someone as ignorant of the world as you to look at me with sympathy. I'd rather die."

Though I don't entirely understand, again his words cut me to the quick.

Prince Irvin sighed once again. "How do you always manage to ruin the mood like this?" He clapped his hands against his cheeks as he mumbled to himself, somehow managing to regain his cool in the process. When he again peered at me, he was back to his usual self. "I get it," he repeated. "So, basically, you want to hire me as your bodyguard to keep you safe. Makes sense. That's the best way to go about things for you, I'm sure, without having to step down from your position as crown princess. Problem is, what benefit is there in this for me?"

His eyes were scrutinizing. It was the same probing look he'd given me when we first met, as if he was trying to ascertain the base value of the person in front of him.

I gulped and opened my mouth to respond, but he interrupted me before I could say anything.

"Just so we're clear, I don't want anything unforeseen to happen to you that'd lead our countries to war. I'm not opposed to doing what I've gotta to make sure that doesn't happen. But that's just my personal feelings at play here. If the tides change between our countries and the man I look up to as the next monarch of our nation

decides war is the best course, I'll fall in line."

In other words, he had his own position to think about. As he sat before me now, he was both the man Irvin Orlanza, with his own motivations and desires, as well as a prince of Maldura. If the situation changed, he could become an enemy. The good will he'd shown me was purely from him as an individual, not in his capacity as prince. He was balancing these two different identities and could prioritize either one at any time. With that in mind, were there really any conditions I could offer that would motivate him?

Only a short time had passed since I countered his proposal with one of my own, but that had been long enough for him to talk his way into a superior position. This was indicative of how much more talented he was at negotiation than me.

"You're practical enough to put more emphasis on current circumstances than your own position," he said. "I admit, it'd be a huge stain on your honor to step down from your position as Sauslind's crown princess to engage yourself to a Malduran prince instead. But your conviction isn't so weak that you'd let that sway you and stop you from accomplishing your true objectives, right?"

Um... Why does it sound like you are speaking about me as if I have budding potential to be like other great historical empresses in history?

"Lord Irvin."

He was wearing his usual intrepid smile as I lifted my hands toward his face. My palms hovered over his cheeks. I waited for the exact moment his eyes moved to follow me before digging my thumbs into his temples and mussing his hair. He let out a small cry of surprise, not expecting this sudden attack.

"What do you think you are doing, Elianna Bernstein?" he growled, voice low and threatening.

My, my, how scary. I was only attempting to utilize what paltry strength I had in my hands to massage his head and loosen up the tension in his brain. I was confident that my arm muscles outmatched that of any of the staff in the archives, but Shiatsu massages were something I'd only read about in books.

Massage therapy could be traced through ancient texts, appearing even in the fallen civilizations of the southern continent. Such arts had also been passed down through the centuries in the far east. One shouldn't underestimate the effectiveness of such practices. In fact, an ancient psychosomatic medical treatise from the southeastern continent, which had yet to be fully understood, referenced a secret, sacred art that allowed one to "open a person's third eye," as the claim went. I had always wished to see it for myself in person.

"Hey." His voice dropped even lower.

"Oh dear." I stopped my ministrations only to realize my thumbs

had slid down to his forehead, forcing his knitted brows apart. His normally sarcastic, mocking expression was ruined. Sensing something disquieting in the aura around him, I withdrew my hands. It seemed prudent to refrain from making any further amateur attempts at this type of therapy.

Meanwhile, Prince Irvin hadn't magically manifested a third eye on his forehead as I had originally pictured, but he did appear more spiritually enlightened at least. That was something. I giggled awkwardly as I leaned away. Perhaps "spiritually enlightened" wasn't the proper description, but his fury was far more pronounced than before as he glared at me.

"Here I was, playing nice, and you decided to play with fire. If you wanna get burnt so badly, then I'm happy to oblige."

The way he spoke made me feel like I was prey that had already fallen into a predator's grasp. This flustered me.

The whole reason I wanted him to loosen up is because...

"Your elder brother is safe and sound," I said.

His fingers, which had ensnared my arm, froze.

I had sensed something off about him since the start of these negotiations. It was common practice to offer favorable terms to someone when they were backed into a corner and to make a push when the other party was weak. Be that as it may, something about his attitude seemed too reckless and hasty.

Prince Irvin had proposed marriage between us in order to keep the path toward mutual friendship between our countries from crumbling, but he'd suddenly changed his position afterward and insisted he had no compunction about fighting us. He was being contradictory and impulsive. Was that because he was desperate to save his own people, who were similarly afflicted with illness? Or was it because he was desperate to find some way out of a situation where war seemed so inevitable? The answer was both, but there was something else as well motivating this prideful man—his desperate desire to save his older brother.

From the perspective of the Maldurans, Sauslind had historically been an unmistakable enemy of their nation. The blood of both countries ran through Prince Irvin's veins. I couldn't even begin to fathom the circumstances in which he'd been raised. His environment had probably shaped him into the very man I saw before me. In spite of all of that, he put his own will second to the man he respected more than any other.

I could tell Prince Irvin wanted to save his country, but I also suspected his desire to save his brother was even stronger than anything else. That was likely why he was so interested in keeping me close, knowing I had connections which could get us information from

inside the royal palace. He was willing to do whatever it took to complete his objectives, no matter the cost. It was because of this that I saw little difference between his situation and the one Sauslind's people and I found ourselves in.

"I absolutely will not allow them to do anything to harm your elder brother," I reassured him. "Those in the palace in whom I place my greatest confidence will do whatever is necessary to ensure he is protected. I swear to you, here and now, that I will not allow anyone else to lose their lives on Sauslind's soil any longer."

Uncle Teddy had died protecting me, alongside some of his men in the Black Wing Knights. Others were sick with the plague; His Majesty and many of his people were teetering on the brink of life and death. People's lives were too precious and irreplaceable. I refused to let even one more be lost while I had the power to stop it.

"Lord Irvin, please place your faith in me and those whom I trust."

What I was offering him was little more than empty words, but I knew I had no other cards in my hand that could win over his trust. I also knew that appealing to someone's emotions was a failing negotiation strategy. On the other hand, I meant what I said. There were people in the palace with whom I'd built a strong relationship of trust—namely, my own older brother and Earl Hayden's daughter, Anna Hayden. I knew the two of them would do everything they could to prevent the scales from tipping enough to launch us into a full-scale conflict.

That was also precisely why I couldn't give up. The reason I found the strength to stand again was that I knew I had people in my camp who wouldn't bend either. I wasn't shouldering this entire burden on my own, nor was I the only one standing up to face every issue we'd been saddled with. There were people who'd continued studying the Ashen Nightmare well after the events from sixteen years ago. It was thanks to all of their efforts over the years that we had two medicines to combat the disease: one that could offer an official diagnosis and one that could prolong the affected person's life.

If I gave up and abandoned everything, I wouldn't be able to save anyone. Nothing would change.

"For those who cannot accomplish something all on their own, they can find strength in those fighting for the same cause. Lord Irvin, you were kind enough to comfort me when my heart had been gravely injured. Thus, I would like to return the same sentiments you expressed to me. You needn't shoulder everything and wear yourself out."

As long as we shared the same objectives, we were comrades. He didn't need to hold the weight of the world and face his problems all on his own; he could split the load with me. That was, after all, the

most elementary way to achieve one's objectives, I would argue.

Prince Irvin's expression betrayed little as he responded to my words with silence. I could tell he was weighing what I'd said against his own thoughts. There were people in the capital we could trust to keep his brother safe, but they were *my* allies and not Prince Irvin's. Even so, the only thing he could do was put his faith in me.

The silence was finally interrupted as he expelled a sigh, one so quiet it seemed to melt into the still air, but it was the length of this sigh that indicated not only resignation but exasperation.

"You're a greedy woman," he muttered under his breath. "You want to stop the war. You want to save the sick. You want to keep my brother from dying. You want to outrun these assassins who are after you. And all of this, you want to accomplish without relinquishing your position as crown princess."

I wasn't about to sacrifice something else in order to achieve my objectives. I wasn't going to forsake anything.

There was a time, long ago, when I thought I would be satisfied as long as I had books to read. I was not that same person anymore. I could look Prince Irvin straight in the face and answer him with confidence.

"It has been said since ancient times that a woman's greed knows no bounds. It's only natural for her to covet beauty, extravagant accessories, status, and luxury. A woman may even desire her beloved's head if it meant he would go to another instead of her. I must caution you not to underestimate a woman's greed, my lord, lest you be the one who is burned by the fires you tempt."

Queen Henrietta had taught me the basics of negotiation. One mustn't flinch from the discussion, and if it should require bluffing to conceal one's unease, then so be it. The first rule, however, was that one mustn't forget to smile.

For the second time in this conversation, Prince Irvin gaped at me. He paused briefly before bursting into laughter. This time, his mirth sounded carefree without being undercut by any other more complex emotions.

"You're actually pretty good at haggling, aren't ya?" He grinned, and after studying me for a moment, he also muttered, "Looks like I've gotten rusty, on the other hand." Despite saying that, Prince Irvin didn't seem all that disappointed with the outcome. He pulled back, maintaining a more respectable distance between us as he flashed his usual smile.

"Fine," he said, sounding cocky again, albeit more conciliatory than before. "I'll take my chances on you. You've got my trust for now, and I'll put the issue with my brother aside. I'll let you hire me as your bodyguard too and offer all the cooperation I'm able to give in

the process. But ya know, I don't come cheap."

Oh, dear. I wonder if my allowance will be enough to cover his fee?

"And I'll find another opportunity to take a pass at you again."

I prefer you didn't do that.

"My goal will be, hm... Let's see... I'd like to make you say that you want my head for yourself."

How splendid. I've been promoted from budding historical empress to female war general who leaps onto the battlefield and loudly proclaims her desire for the blood of her enemies.

I suddenly realized that I too was feeling less tense than before. Prince Irvin had likely taken it easy on me. He was perfectly capable of using other means to accomplish his objectives rather than bowing down to my haphazard attempts at negotiation. Fortunately, he'd chosen to bet on me.

"Thank you, Lord Irvin."

Looking back, I'd been fortunate to receive his continued assistance ever since the two of us had reunited. I'd taken his good favor for granted in the process. A sharp pain shot through my chest, but in front of me, Prince Irvin spoke with the same teasing tone he always did.

"Hm, how should I have you repay me for my services?" He gave me a suggestive look, but the moment was interrupted.

"Please take your payment from the coffers of the demon lord!" stated a voice from the doorway, where the door had swung open at some point without the knob ever making a sound.

Shocked, I jerked my head around to get a peek. Lord Alan was standing there with one of his arms wrapped in bandages, and beside him was Prince Irvin's retainer, Rei, whose head was cloaked in cloth. The door had apparently been left ajar to begin with, and the two of them had eavesdropped on our entire conversation.

I was overcome with embarrassment, while Prince Irvin cast a sigh of annoyance.

"Listening in on your masters' private conversation, huh? You two have some real guts. Rei, Maestro."

"Why, I never," said Lord Alan, not sounding the least bit guilty for his actions. The maestro with honey-colored hair and emerald green eyes maintained his usual mischievous demeanor. "My master is Prince Chris, I'll remind you. Plus, if it's finances you're after, then I'm your man. Although, you know...I do feel kind of relieved. At the beginning there, I was thinking I was going to have to go on a *looong* business trip for my own safety, but, uh..." His voice trailed off as his gaze began to wander. Under his breath, he continued, "Looks like Lord Irvin's not even in the running, huh?"

Before Prince Irvin's mood was completely soured, his retainer

earnestly cut in to comment, nodding as he did so. "I initially thought you to be nothing more than a doll with some impressive knowledge, but your ability to make the prince dance in the palm of your hand demonstrates great promise. It does seem worth considering bringing you over to our side."

"Aww, come on," Lord Alan grumbled at him with a shake of the head. "Are you seriously thinking about trying to install her into a position of power in your own country? You've got no idea how terrifying our demon lord can be."

"Regrettably, we have our own dictatorial black magic sorceress."

"Much as I empathize since we have a shared plight, I still have to draw the line somewhere. Oh, but I've got an idea! How about we trade intel on the weaknesses of our respective tyrants?"

Rei shook his head. "Hah. That's hardly a bargain. Your master's weakness is all too apparent."

"Aw, that's not true." As Lord Alan's eyes traveled back to me, they were so bright and filled with amusement that they gave no indication he was feeling any pain from his injuries. "Lady Elianna isn't a weakness. She's the strongest trump card we've got. She can power him up or turn him into—an admittedly still terrifying—coward. The best part is that I can burn through all the money in his coffers without pausing to weigh the pros and cons of each financial decision and he won't fault me for it because it involves m'lady here."

"I am not quite sure you would call that a trump card," Rei countered.

The strength I found in Lord Alan's emerald eyes warmed my heart. It served as a reminder that I had people with me who would supplement my weaknesses with their strengths, not out of a sense of duty but because they believed in me from the bottom of their hearts.

A nostalgic voice echoed in my head. "*You are my trump card, Elianna.*"

Right now, I had absolutely nothing, but I was alive and safe and capable of coming up with some way out of this. Frankly, I did feel as though I'd lost sight of His Highness's heart. I'd lost the clue he'd entrusted to my care, and moreover, I had no idea whether whatever actions I took would serve as his "trump card" while he tried to stand against the hardships facing the realm. Regardless, I wasn't going to forfeit. Giving up was the one thing I absolutely couldn't do.

Filled with renewed determination, I straightened my posture, finally returning to my full height after crouching for so long. It was at that precise moment that a new voice interrupted us.

"Oh dear," said Mabel, sounding reproachful of the imprudence I'd shown. She had apparently hurried here from Dr. Hester's room.

Mabel had served Lord Alexei Strasser's house in the capital as a

maid descending from a family of midwives. Due to the extraordinary circumstances we found ourselves in, she was currently attending to me. She'd shown incredible resilience in her care for me throughout our terrible misadventures, and it was for that reason I found her most dependable.

It had taken Mabel only a glance around the room to deduce the situation. "It's disgraceful for so many men to be gathered in a lady's room like this," she said admonishingly. Her eyes stopped on me. "Lady Eli— Pardon me. El, Dr. Hester has awoken and has asked for you. Please make your way to her bedside." She'd corrected herself, addressing me by the name I'd been using for my disguise.

The mention of Dr. Hester felt like a knife digging into my heart. I promptly nodded. While her gaze had softened with me, it hardened the moment she turned her eyes to Prince Irvin, who had taken a seat on the floor after our charged exchange.

"You there, the man-child who I can easily guess was throwing a hissy fit to get his way, haven't you the strength to stand? If not, I'd be happy to lend you a hand."

Lord Alan burst into a snickering fit at Mabel's scathing remarks. Prince Irvin, meanwhile, looked visibly annoyed, which was a rare thing for him. He even muttered under his breath, "Women sure are freakin' terrifying."

Chapter 2: Unbending Heart

The room I was chased away from earlier turned out to be a rather ordinary two-person accommodation. It was furnished with two beds, a tall partition screen, and a shelving unit for travelers to store their things. Since the room was tucked deep inside the inn, it lacked any windows to the outside. Silence pervaded the room, as the hour was late and most residents were already fast asleep. The only sound was the barely audible noise of the simple heat stone as it produced vapor to heat the room.

Dr. Hester was sitting up in one of the beds. She'd authored a number of books on herbs and was an herbalist herself. She was moving on in years, and her heart illness had left her with such a strikingly deathlike pallor that even someone with a complete lack of medical knowledge couldn't help but notice.

I opened my mouth, intending to apologize for the part I'd played in her misfortune, but she interrupted me with a loud grunt. Too intimidated to try again, I froze.

"Your apologies ain't worth even a single dora to me, girl. You think my house will magically come back if you say you're sorry? You think the research journal my daughter and her husband left—among all the other things lost in the fire—will miraculously come back?"

All of it had been reduced to ash. Her family's memories, their records, the culmination of years of effort, the time spent together—their very place to return home to—was gone. I had stolen everything. Admittedly, Jean was the one who started the fire, but I was the one who'd put faith in him and kept him at my side. There was also no question that I was the only reason he'd resorted to such measures.

I clenched my fists. No matter what she said, I had to at least bow my head.

She let out another, albeit smaller, grunt. "You and me, girl, we made it out safe and sound. That's plenty."

"Dr. Hester..."

"More importantly..." Her powerful gaze pierced right through me. The intensity she exuded coupled with those hardy grunts she kept making would have anyone second-guessing whether she was actually ill or not. "You should be worrying about what you're gonna do now, rather than what you've already lost. So? What's your plan? Have you got any other clues about a cure for the Ashen Nightmare?"

Or an idea for what the cause of it all is?”

No, I had nothing. Furya’s Jar was the only clue we had, one that His Highness had specifically entrusted to me.

I shook my head. *But surely if we look, there has to be something else.*

The problem was that we didn’t have the spare time to go about hunting down another clue with nothing to go on. Losing those geological survey records was a terrible blow to our progress, but there were still other avenues of inquiry we could pursue. On the other hand...we didn’t have any other clues for a cure.

I chewed on my lip.

“Um,” interrupted a quiet voice.

I glanced at the corner of the room. Lord Alan and the others had followed us, and they’d tried to give us space by standing near the wall.

“So, um,” Lord Alan went on, “Dr. Hester, you haven’t actually read *Furya’s Jar*, then? I realize memorizing the entire book would be impossible, but surely there was some kind of hint or something...?”

She grunted at him, and as ambiguous as such a noise was, I was still able to read the meaning behind it. Herbalism, as a field, was broken up into different specialties. Having read the books Dr. Hester had authored, I knew very well that hers wasn’t related to the prevention or treatment of epidemics.

After making the aforementioned unflattering noise with her nose, which was an attempt to dismiss Lord Alan’s amateurish suggestion, Dr. Hester snarkily quipped, “Even assuming I had carefully read each page of *Furya’s Jar*, what of it? You plan on taking a whip to this sick old woman to try to coax me into researching a cure for you?”

“Hmm...” Lord Alan quietly responded, with the same amount of sass, “You sure don’t look like a sick elderly woman in need of such pampering.”

Before she could bicker with him, I stared directly into her eyes and said, “There isn’t any... That is, there are no other clues about a cure. I suspect we will have to entrust that matter to the researchers in the capital. I intend to contact Earl Ralshen’s estate and head for the Urma Mines next. I am the crown prince’s betrothed, so there is still something I can do here. They certainly need all the extra hands they can get there.”

Not wanting to waste another second, I tried to apologize for the trouble I’d caused her and say my farewells, but once more she cut me off. This time, it was with an exasperated sigh.

“You’re far too naive, Elianna Bernstein.” She’d reverted back to the way she’d been when we first met—back to the man-hating witch. Once again, her tone was obstinate and hostile, full of reproach and

contempt for the royal family. "What good do you think it'll do for you to dive into a group of the afflicted? This is Ralshen, my girl. They'll only hate you more if you waltz in there, flaunting your link to the royal family. Know what they'll think of you? They'll think, 'What's this useless aristocrat doing here, treating the sick like some kind of rare animal exhibit?'"

My already clenched fists tightened. The royal family, or rather the entire country, had abandoned Ralshen in the past, and a deep-seated mistrust for those in power had already taken root. My arrival would do little to improve that. Her words were a cruel reminder of what had already been made perfectly clear to me by the people here. Nonetheless, I gazed straight at Dr. Hester's face, eyes full of resolve.

Her eyes met mine with cold mistrust. "You think if you parade in there, making a show of your sincerity and devotion to the people, they'll welcome you with open arms? If so, you're nothing but a naive idealist with your head in the clouds. If a useless noble lady like you goes there, it'll just end with them throwing you out."

Without a doubt, her argument was logically sound. I couldn't even take care of myself. Outside of my status and the titles they afforded me, I had nothing. The proposal I'd made, from Dr. Hester's perspective, was meaningless. Her response was something I'd considered myself too. I knew there was little meaning in riding in with nothing but my status and titles, with no real way of saving those suffering, but so many of them were out there waiting for help. I wanted to go to them. At the same time, I couldn't provide them with any substantial aid. What the people really wanted was a cure. The Ashen Nightmare was a terrifying phantom, one some even called a death sentence, so what we needed was something to treat those afflicted, a way to save them from the clutches of the underworld—a remedy.

"Ngh." My fingernails had dug so deep into my skin that it was a miracle they hadn't drawn blood. But no matter how vexed I was, I could say nothing in my defense.

"You're being irresponsible," Dr. Hester said, her words a cold dagger of reality that punctured the vain hopes I'd been harboring.

Reflexively, my head jerked up. What I saw in her eyes this time was not contempt for royalty, but rather reproach toward me for not better considering my position.

"When someone in power makes the order to go in and provide aid to the afflicted, those below them have to fall in line. That's their duty, after all. Doesn't matter if it's a place where people are dying by the dozens daily. Doesn't matter if they know they're risking their own life by doing it. A superior's orders are absolute. You realize that's exactly what you're about to do to the people following you, don't

you?”

Would it really restore the people's hope if we were to rush in without any clear way of providing them relief? Or would my actions instead only increase the number of those infected? Perhaps my plan was a conceited way of trying to make myself feel better—a way to tide people over for lack of a better option.

My entire body trembled. I was crushed and humiliated, and to make matters worse, hot indignation was swelling in the pit of my stomach. I knew it wasn't right to take my emotions out on Dr. Hester. Logically, I understood that it was wrong, but...

“Then... Then what do you propose I do? We have no clues left to us. There is no cure for this epidemic either. The best we can do is provide more hands to tend to the sick. What other course of action would you have me take?” As the words tumbled out of my mouth, I felt like a lost child desperate for someone to point me in the right direction. It was as I spoke that I also came to the shocking realization that, without even knowing it, I'd been clinging to Furya's Jar to fix everything.

In the end, I'm no different now than I was as a child.

While I battled to hold in the overwhelming wave of emotions crashing over me, another small grunt cut into my thoughts.

Curt as ever, Dr. Hester retorted, “There is still a clue.”

I blinked at her in confusion.

“There is another Furya's Jar.”

Silence filled the room.

It was said that Furya, daughter of the medicine god Askleia, carried a jar on her shoulder that contained within it a panacea. All information about this magical cure-all was recorded in a legendary book of the same title: *Furya's Jar*. Dr. Furness, Dr. Hester's father, was a yet-unsurpassed authority in the field of herbalism, so the research journal he'd left behind was thus dubbed Furya's Jar.

I'd seen the book go up in flames myself—watched as our hopes turned to ash—but Dr. Hester claimed there was another one?

Dr. Hester said nothing more, and in the quiet, I could even hear the sound of her swallowing. I pressed closer, hoping for her to say more, but she only snorted at me again, sounding just as cold and scornful as she had a moment ago.

“I trusted you once and handed Furya's Jar to you, but you immediately lost it. I can't risk trusting you with anything else important after that.”

My vision grew dark as her words sank in. I couldn't deny her accusation. The last time she had offered me something that was precious to her, it had turned into ash. It had taken all her trust in me and all of my hope with it. It would be too selfish to ask her to chance

that happening again.

My legs threatened to buckle as my thoughts tormented me with the same suffocating question. *What do I do?* I could hardly bother keeping up pretenses at this point.

But all of my thoughts were interrupted when Dr. Hester continued, "At least, that's what I'd like to say." Her tone sounded lighter now, like she was teasing.

I'd been holding my breath the entire time, and that lack of airflow left me dizzy enough that I nearly stumbled. Perhaps Dr. Hester's persistent snorting and disdainful attitude was her way of getting back at me for dragging her into this whole mess.

"This Furry's Jar isn't a book that I can freely do whatever I want with, you understand," Dr. Hester continued, sounding no less curt than before. "We'll have to ask the person who keeps that knowledge in their head if they wanna cooperate or not." Her gaze darted over to someone who was standing in the corner of the room. Everyone's eyes soon followed, landing on Gene—the embodiment of childish unsociability.

Silence once again fell over the room, and the first to disrupt it this time was Prince Irvin. Confused, he said, "Huh? Look, old lady, that's a pretty crappy joke. Furry's Jar is as valuable as any other ancient tome, y'know. There's no way this little shrimp contains a panacea inside him. Your humor stinks...but I do get you wanna try to console our Bibliophile Princess." He let out a strangled laugh at the end.

Lord Alan, meanwhile, hummed under his breath and contemplated what Dr. Hester had said. "Come to think of it, there is something that has been bothering me. It seems clear the Gene is only twelve or maybe thirteen. The Ashen Nightmare last broke out sixteen years ago. You claimed it was the year after your daughter and her husband passed away. So...I assume he must be adopted?" Lord Alan paused and waved a dismissive hand. "No, I suppose that's not really relative to our current circumstances."

Beside Alan, Rei furrowed his brow as he muttered, "It was even written in a folktale, about a witch taking in a child to fatten him up so she could eat him..."

Dr. Hester's keen hearing immediately picked up Rei's whispers, and the look she gave all three men was exactly as menacing as you would expect from the woman who'd been dubbed the man-hating witch.

"If you've got the time to pointlessly flap your jaws, then maybe I ought to throw you in a pot and use you as ingredients for a new type of elixir. Or would you rather be my human test subjects and consume poisons that no person has ever dared to test before?" She cackled.

The men in the room instantly clammed up, while Mabel nodded eagerly as if she agreed with Dr. Hester's suggestion and was saying, *"Oh, please, go ahead and take them all."*

As for me, the stormy cloud of negative emotions had passed, leaving me to expel a small breath or relief. A renewed sense of vigor coursed through me with my next inhale. I was impatient about making progress, yes, but I told myself not to rush—to keep a cool head.

I peered over at Lord Gene. His chestnut-colored hair was cut in a bob around his chin, and his eyes were narrow and sharp. "My lord," I started to say, hoping to pursue this new line of inquiry.

"I'm a girl!" Lord—pardon, Lady—Gene spat at me, her voice cracking like a whip through the air as if she'd lost all patience for our misgendering of her.

Everyone let out a collective squeak of surprise. Some followed it up with a confused, "Huh?"

Lady Gene greatly resembled her grandmother as she glared at us, eyes full of fury.

"I didn't say anything because I know I'm tiny and not at all feminine, but what does my gender have to do with me inheriting Furya's Jar, huh? Do your looks have some kind of impact on your abilities? You all could be scarecrows for how brainless you are. And while we're at it, I'm a true-blooded great-granddaughter of Furness Alkemy!"

"Wha..." Lord Alan squeaked in surprise.

Prince Irvin seemed similarly skeptical, humming under his breath. His servant, Rei, kept silent, although his eyes were scrutinizing Gene intensely.

Lady Gene's eyes filled with determination as she sneered at the three men. "Don't believe me? Then how about I prove it to ya right here and now by stripping naked? As long as that'll satisfy your doubts, I've got no problems doin' it."

"My goodness," echoed both Mabel and I. We gave the men chastising looks, and they promptly lifted their hands and shook their heads. Dr. Hester snorted with laughter, which eased the tension in the room.

Having settled that, I turned to Lady Gene and said, "I do hope you will excuse our rudeness. Might I also inquire as to what your age is?"

She huffed and turned her cheek toward me. Her side profile offered a glimpse of the answer I sought, the contours of her face too immature for an adult. Her attitude was still childlike as well. Curtly, she replied, "I'm sixteen. Not that you have to believe me."

"I most certainly do believe you," I reassured her, taking her

words at face value. I stepped closer as I addressed her. It wasn't too long ago that she'd quite cruelly spurned me. She hadn't said it at the time, but I'd read it on her face. "*If it weren't for you, none of this would have happened.*" I was afraid she might say it this time and turn me away, but I couldn't falter now. "Lady Gene, am I to understand that you have actually inherited Furya's Jar?"

"So what if I have, huh?" She scowled and opened her mouth, likely about to tack on the same line she had with my last question—"Not that you have to believe me"—but I interrupted her.

"Please give yourself to me."

"Wha?" Her jaw dropped. She flinched and retreated a step, her back pressed flat against the wall. "Wh-What are you saying? I told you I'm a girl. I may talk and act like a guy when trading herbs, but that's just so people don't look down on me. I really am a girl, I tell you— Hey! Stop looking at me like you're starving and just found your next meal! Don't tell me you're the real cannibal here, princess!"

Oh my, you wound me. From my perspective, it was as though the legendary tome *Furya's Jar*, which I'd thought lost for eternity—one I'd yet to have the pleasure to read—was suddenly there right before my eyes. I could hardly contain my eagerness to peruse its pages, anxious to devour the hitherto unknown knowledge contained within. This was the culmination of Dr. Furness's work, a collection of notes on plagues and cures, which he'd left behind when he passed. It was a research journal harboring untold possibilities. I had been so certain that I would never see it again, yet here it was.

"Stop groping the air like that! You can tickle me all you like, but I'm not a book! That's not going to turn any pages!"

Would it be terrible if I tested that theory? As I fell into silent contemplation over how best to peruse the tome in front of me, a cough echoed from behind me.

"Elianna," Mabel said in a quiet, if not scolding, voice.

My shoulders jumped as I regained my senses. I cleared my throat and promptly straightened my back. I had to admit, though, that the way Lady Gene eyed me warily like she was a baby goat about to be swallowed alive was a bit offensive. I was no wolf.

Near the wall behind me, Lord Alan muttered, "She's like a wolf that only pretended to be a rabbit until now... No, perhaps even rabbits are secretly carnivores."



“Some part of me feels kinda envious,” Prince Irvin admitted, “but there’s something decidedly different between what I’m seeing and what I’m after.” His words suggested that he’d deduced my intent already.

Ignoring the gallery and their unneeded commentary, I composed myself and faced Lady Gene again. I opened my mouth to repeat the same line I’d said earlier, but before I could make a sound, she cut me off.

“No way. Not happening.” It wasn’t fear that welled up in her eyes this time but conviction. “I’d have to be outta my mind to help you after everything you put us through.”

I flinched back, and her eyes were sharp enough to notice that my strength had wavered. Her voice climbed higher as she threw accusations at me.

“You sure are letting this all get to your head. Have you got any idea what you’ve done? Do you think all is forgiven just ‘cause my grandma doesn’t blame you? She was on death’s door all because you butted into our lives. Do you even get that? I’m sayin’ that if you’d never come here, none of this would’ve ever happened to us. Now our house, the house my mom and dad lived in... It’s gone. Give it back!”

I could sense from the sudden tension around Mabel that she was about to protest, and I held up a hand to stop her, but my actions only further infuriated Lady Gene.

“So conceited... There’s nothin’ a pompous noble like you can do by comin’ out here to the middle of the mountains! Go ahead and look at the people suffering with pity, if that’s what you want, then pack it up and go home. I bet then you can feel good about yourself for carin’ so much. You stinkin’ hypocrite!”

The abusive language that flew out of her mouth was difficult to reconcile with the first impression I had of her as an extremely quiet and reserved individual. However, her barrage of insults was abruptly cut off when a voice from one of the neighboring rooms boomed, “Shut it, will ya!” Their irritation was that of someone who’d been unceremoniously roused from slumber in the middle of the night. Considering how faint their protest sounded, their room was probably somewhat removed from the one Dr. Hester and her granddaughter were occupying, which was tucked into the middle of the building. The proprietor had been kind enough to give them this one out of consideration, though he knew nothing of their true circumstances.

My eyes fell back on Lady Gene, whose petite body overflowed with deep resentment. In the course of everything that had happened, I’d come to understand my own unyielding convictions, which I took the opportunity now to convey to her.

“Lady Gene, no amount of apologizing will ever be enough to make amends for what I have done by putting your lives in danger and robbing you of your home. Nonetheless, please allow me to try my best to compensate you for all of this.”

Her eyes only hardened at what must have been, to her, a most conventional and predictable acknowledgment of my culpability.

Regardless of how she felt, I continued, “I must, however, inform you that even if I’d known the cost of my involvement in your lives, I would have still chosen the same path. Even knowing the danger it would put you in, even knowing your treasured home would be turned to ash, I would repeat the same course no matter how many times it required to reach my goal.”

Fury burned in Lady Gene’s eyes as she glowered at me. If she could shoot fire from them, she surely would have.

“Because,” I went on, undeterred, “at the end of this path is Furya’s Jar.”

That was why my choices had been necessary.

Lady Gene’s eyes, the same chestnut hue as her hair, froze over. It was as though my words were an ice arrow that had pierced straight through her. She stared at me, seeming to sense my unwavering determination. It was through her eyes that I spotted something that suggested she was harboring some other emotion than what I’d seen thus far—something other than the animosity and bitterness she’d shown me.

“Lady Gene, I must implore you. You have inherited Furya’s Jar—Dr. Furness’s research notes. Please, won’t you share that knowledge with me?”

Her eyes were like an ocean, and my question prompted a barely discernible ripple in them. Still, the seas remained otherwise calm in the face of my plea, so her grandmother added her own request to mine.

“Gene, this isn’t a decision for you to make based on personal feelings. Give your answer as a professional, as a herbalist.” Her voice was quiet but stern. She spoke to Lady Gene not as a loving grandmother to her granddaughter but as a strict master to her apprentice.

The ocean waves grew tumultuous now, and in them I glimpsed hesitation, anxiety, and some other unidentifiable emotion threatening to spill forth at a moment’s notice. This young girl’s face contorted with a wide range of emotion, and after a few moments of tense silence, the words slipped past her lips.

“It’s impossible,” she said.

It was as if a crack had formed in the strong walls she’d erected around her, and it only seemed to grow, spreading farther and farther

outward in all directions. In a shaky breath, she further confessed the agony and anguish she'd been harboring.

"In the middle of winter, a doctor selling herbs in bulk came through and mentioned that the surge of colds we were seein' could be the Ashen Nightmare. Soon as I heard that, I started workin' on my research. I figured as long as I had Furya's Jar and all my great-grandpa's knowledge contained within it, I could find a cure. But I was wrong. I could make something that lessened the symptoms of affected townspeople, but it wasn't a cure. A few days later, their condition would get worse. No matter how many patients I saw or how many trial medicines I made, I knew it was beyond me. I couldn't make a cure for this thing. Because..." Her voice cracked as she said that word, and my heart ached for the torment I heard in it. "Because I...don't really know anythin' about the Ashen Nightmare."

I pursed my lips.

The Ashen Nightmare had first broken out sixteen years ago. It had wreaked havoc for three long years before finally abating. Since Lady Gene was only sixteen, she hadn't seen the horrors for herself. I had only childhood recollections of it myself, but unlike her, I'd been allowed into the palace as the prince's betrothed, where I was able to become acquainted with those studying the Ashen Nightmare. Through them, I managed to learn more about the plague and the devastation it had wrought. That was a privilege I only enjoyed because of my status. It was clear from what we'd heard along our travels that the same knowledge the researchers held had not reached the people.

It was widely agreed that the Ashen Nightmare had subsided only three years after its outbreak. Chief Herbalist Nigel eventually discovered that the symptoms of the Ashen Nightmare initially resembled those of an ordinary cold. Even so, something was fundamentally different between the two, and that difference was what had allowed the chief herbalist to develop a method of diagnosis. Unfortunately, since it was winter when he developed it, the kingdom was unable to mandate its usage.

For a few years after the epidemic ended, people had continued to remain cautious by force of habit, but as time marched onward, they gradually began to loosen their guard. People began to neglect memories of those dark times. Those who'd experienced the devastation themselves refrained from sharing what they saw and felt.

The reluctance to revisit it was perhaps born of fear. People wondered, *"Back then, did I make the right call? Perhaps if I'd gone down a different path, it wouldn't have cost me the lives of precious family members, of people I held so dear. Maybe..."* Such doubt was sown in the heart of those who lived through those tumultuous times, and the

roots of those seeds ran so deep that people refused to speak of it. People's attitudes reverted back to the way they were before. Each village retained their own methodology for handling outbreaks of disease without much outside influence.

It was now, as I reflected on all of this, that I realized something I'd overlooked for so long. Even with the knowledge from Furya's Jar in my grasp, I couldn't make a cure for an illness if I knew little about it. I had, up until this point, deluded myself into thinking that as long as I found that legendary tome, I could somehow create the alleged panacea, as if that would magically solve everything.

The doctor Lady Gene had mentioned must have been one of the first to realize what was really happening when he visited Mt. Urma's mining town. From what she relayed about him, he must have been alarmed, sensing the impending crisis. In turn, having stored the contents of Furya's Jar in her own head, the young herbalist had proceeded to research a possible cure, only to find herself foiled at every turn. The burden she'd chosen to shoulder was one that should have been the kingdom's to handle.

Lady Gene had been harboring inside of her several warring emotions: a deep desire to help those suffering, a frustration at her inability to do so, and self-blame for her own immaturity that was holding her back. The more I longed for Furya's Jar, the more she would feel driven into a corner.

The townspeople gave Lady Gene's grandmother, also known as the man-hating witch, a wide berth. In turn, the two weren't particularly close with the townspeople either. It also wasn't as if Lady Gene was so dedicated to the kingdom that she was willing to put her life on the line to rescue the entire nation. All of these things made her the least likely to want to help those afflicted, yet she'd made her best efforts to search for a cure—because she was a professional, an herbalist.

"Lady Gene," I mumbled. So moved was I by the pride and conviction held within that petite body that I reached toward her, grasping her tightly clenched fists in my hands. In reverent tones, I pleaded, "Please allow me to assist you. Whatever you require, I shall provide. It may be an impossible endeavor to discover this cure all on your own, but that is why I will support you and do everything in my power to see you accomplish just that."

Her eyes trembled with emotion. Peering into them, I saw hesitation and mistrust, but I could also discern a scale that was at last tipping ever so slightly in my favor. I nodded encouragingly at her, hoping to push her along.

"Even if, after all of our efforts, we are unable to find a cure, the responsibility of that failure will fall to me. It will absolutely not be

your fault.”

I was the one who'd made this choice. I was the one who'd sought Furya's Jar. I was the one convinced it would lead us to a cure. None of what happened or would come to happen could be laid at Lady Gene's feet.

The ripples in the ocean were far more violent now. Her eyes brimmed with such immeasurable emotion that they threatened to spill over, until she at last averted her gaze. She narrowly protected the dam from breaking through the sheer force of her own stubborn nature.

“You're irresponsible,” Lady Gene spat at me, in the same reproachful tone and with the same chastising words her grandmother had used earlier. “There are people waiting for aid out there. You think you can just play it off if we fail and say, ‘Sorry, I tried. My bad?’”

“No,” I said firmly.

Her youthful face hardened as if she was bracing herself against a response she'd already seen coming.

I kept a firm grip on her hands—noticing that the tips of her fingers had grown coarse, like that of any other herbalist dedicated to their craft—and answered, “At the beginning, I was certain that Furya's Jar was nothing more than a legend. I did not believe it actually existed. But to my surprise, it actually did. I watched once as it disappeared before my very eyes. But now, I have you here right in front of me.” The warmth in her hands gave me strength. “You are proof that none of our hopes were in vain. So should we fail to find a cure ourselves, I believe strongly that somewhere in the world, there must be one. As long as people refuse to stop searching, one *will* be found.”

My answer shared the same ideology held by the many authors of ancient medical texts who'd passed their knowledge on to the next generation. Lady Gene had inherited Furya's Jar, and while the original was gone, she yet lived. Her survival was like a beacon of hope, and I overflowed with gratitude for her presence.

Lady Gene stared at me in disbelief. Her eyes were utterly vacant of the warring emotions they'd held prior, yet the longer I gazed into them, the more a passionate flame began to burn, swelling brighter and brighter.

“You're outta your damn mind,” she spat at me, though it wasn't anger that filled her voice as she spoke in such an unladylike manner, but rather intense fervor. “There's gotta be another cure somewhere out there, huh? What a load of crock. Don't even say shit like that.” This time, Lady Gene grasped my hands. She gazed back at me with conviction as she confidently announced, “I am Gene Arman, Hester

Vassos's apprentice and the one who has inherited Furya's Jar. I never said anything about quittin'. I'll find this cure. Hurry up and give me all the info you've got on the Ashen Nightmare!"

My posture stiffened as I said, "Yes, of course!"

Lord Alan, seemingly impressed with what he'd witnessed, muttered, "So this is how an airhead spurs people to action..."

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After that exchange, we decided to move so as not to further disturb Dr. Hester's rest and retreated to the room I shared with Mabel. We left Rei behind with Dr. Hester in case anything unforeseen were to happen.

My room with Mabel was sandwiched between Prince Irvin's and Lord Alan's. This inn was a respectable enough establishment, but the walls were thin. This actually worked to our benefit, though; the men could easily pick up on any strange sounds within our quarters, which was why we'd decided on these arrangements.

The hour was late enough that midnight had already passed, but not a single one of us bothered to sleep, our minds too alert to even try. We instead continued our discussions.

I was currently seated in front of a small desk, my feathered pen dancing across a sheet of paper. In front of me, Lady Gene sat on another chair we'd borrowed from one of the other rooms. She held a piece of paper in her hand as she relayed the possible mixtures we might test as a cure.

However, before we'd switched from Dr. Hester's room to mine...

Initially, I'd entertained the idea of contacting Earl Ralshen's estate to ask them to furnish us with doctors and herbalists, but Lady Gene immediately dismissed that option. Her decision was a levelheaded one; the knowledge held by the doctors and herbalists in Ralshen would provide us no new or unexplored avenues Lady Gene hadn't tested already.

I had even hesitated despite being the one to suggest the idea. From the outset, it had been my intention to relay the news to Chief Herbalist Nigel if I found any clues about a cure. Perhaps then I could convince them to send additional people to aid me. It was an inescapable fact that the capital had far better knowledge and research materials on the subject than any of the kingdom's outlying regions.

It was when I instructed Lord Alan to make arrangements so I could pen a missive that he suddenly handed me something unexpected.

"The chief threatened—err, uh, encouraged—me to hand this to

you. He said, 'You'd better not lose this. When you hand it to her... Nah, she'll get the picture, I bet. Hee hee!'"

What he gave me were two recipes that detailed the ingredients of two medications: one to suppress the symptoms of the Ashen Nightmare and another to diagnose it.

"Show me that!" Lady Gene practically leaped at me. Her eyes raced across each sheet of paper. Much like the doctor at the earl's residence, she quietly recited each ingredient to herself.

Now it makes sense, I thought, vexed by what this very situation had demonstrated. His Highness had made a point of distributing recipes, specifically for the medicine that would suppress symptoms, all across the country, but his decree had been limited to only major cities. A tiny town like Hersche, which merely sat along the highway, wouldn't have received it.

Almost as quickly, I found myself falling into thought. *But then, perhaps...* I was soon interrupted by an irritated voice.

"Get writing, Cannibal Princess."

Once again, I'd earned myself a new and most unflattering epithet.

Back in the present, I was scribbling down the concoctions Lady Gene had tested as quickly as I could, all the while feeling deeply impressed by the knowledge Furry's Jar had afforded her. I hadn't received any formal education in herbology, but I'd become acquainted with the researchers in the palace's Pharmacy Lab and even worked as an assistant there from time to time. The admittedly shallow insight that afforded me helped me understand how vast the knowledge was that Lady Gene held within her, and how creative she'd been in trying to engineer a cure.

Not wanting to pressure Lady Gene, I tried to restrain myself, but it was impossible to hide the growing hope that brightened my face. I endeavored nonetheless to hold it in as I continued moving my pen.

Lord Alan was seated on one of the nearby beds, while Prince Irvin leaned his back against the wall. Mabel hovered beside me, quickly changing out one sheet of paper for another the moment I filled its margins. The three of them were speaking in hushed voices.

The hour was too late for us to venture outside, collect herbs, and begin mixing them together. Lady Gene instead decided to dedicate her time to coming up with ideas for possible mixtures to test. I was doing what little I could to assist her.

Mabel and the others couldn't simply leave us to our own devices without doing anything themselves. Instead, they spoke quietly, keeping their voices low out of consideration for the other guests who were fast asleep. Their conversation, of course, revolved around the

Ashen Nightmare. Lady Gene had told them, “I need info on this plague. I want everything you know about it. How it’s affecting the country now, what the situation is like, what it was like in the past, anything you’ve heard from our foreign neighbors. Anything will help.”

Despite being petite and looking young even for her age, Lady Gene was able to list off reagents to me for her recipes while also tuning into the conversation going on between the others. I was in awe of her multitasking abilities, but I hadn’t the time to waste gawking; I needed to keep my pen moving.

Lord Alan was relaying the percentage of those who’d been taken with sickness long ago in one of the harbor cities, when Mabel suddenly cut in and said, “That reminds me...” Something in her tone, as if she’d had an epiphany, drew Lady Gene’s attention enough to prompt her to stop speaking to me.

Mabel had only brought this up, of course, because Lady Gene had insisted that she wanted any info at all, no matter how small. Mabel picked up on the fact that Lady Gene was intently focused on her and briefly paused to send me an apologetic look before continuing. “Um...on the way here from the capital, Duchess Rosalia and Lady Elianna were together practically the entire time. They were in the same carriage the entire way, ate their meals together, and met the same exact people. The only times they separated was when they retired for the night. But, uh...”

Since Mabel was struggling to articulate her suspicions, Prince Irvin said them for her. “Oh yeah, come to think of it, that duchess lady came down with the Ashen Nightmare, but our Bibliophile Princess here is the picture of health still.”

“Yeah, but the same can be said for the other maids and bodyguards who were with us, right?” Lord Alan shot back. “Even among the servants, some came down ill while others did not. I, myself, am part of the latter group. Maybe it’s got something to do with age?”

Mabel made a very interesting point. She was right; Duchess Rosalia and I had eaten all the same things, seen all the same sights, met with all the same people, and spent our time the exact same way. Mabel, Lilia, and the other maids hadn’t shared quite as much as the duchess and I had since they ate apart from us at times. Nonetheless, Duchess Rosalia had taken ill while I remained untouched. It was possible that the plague was still incubating inside of me, but for the moment at least, I was healthy. Had there been some meaningful difference between the two of us?

Lady Gene fell into silent contemplation.

“You sure there’s no chance our traitor had a hand in this?” Prince

Irvin asked as casually as one might inquire about the weather, in spite of how serious the allegation was.

“Huh?” I blurted, lifting my gaze. His black eyes bore into me, quiet and scathing in their unspoken rebuke.

Prince Irvin’s tone took a harsh edge as he explained, “I’m sayin’, isn’t it possible that guy you always kept beside you intentionally infected this duchess lady?”

“No, that cannot be...!” Mabel said with a gasp. Her protest was not one of disbelief, but of deep offense for the insult he’d made to the very profession of maids like herself. Unfortunately, I couldn’t entirely discount his suggestion.

“What? But...” Lord Alan also tried to dismiss the idea, until the realization hit him that Prince Irvin might very well be right.

I cannot run away, I reminded myself, refusing to avert my eyes from the reality before me. The moment I tried to speak my manservant’s name, I was hit with a flashback. Memories flooded my mind. I saw once more the blade he’d turned on me and the fire that had raged all around us. My thoughts froze. Though I understood his betrayal was undeniable, I still struggled to accept it.

I closed my eyes for a moment and steadied my breathing. Concentrating all my focus on the suspicions I too had been harboring, I said, “There is no question that Jean is on the enemy’s side. Keeping in mind what Prince Irvin has proposed, there are a few suppositions and assumptions we can draw. First, let’s consider the fact that His Majesty has also been infected.”

Mabel let out a small squeak, but I ignored her and continued speaking. Something had been weighing on my mind ever since we got word at Earl Ralshen’s estate of the situation in the capital.

“The established theory is that the Ashen Nightmare spreads from northern regions, yet this time, the outbreak happened in both Ralshen and the capital almost simultaneously, with only a scarce couple of days between the two events. How could that happen? The answer, I believe, is contained in the letter His Highness wrote to me. He believes the enemy knows exactly how the sickness is spread.”

Mabel jumped in surprise. All of the color drained from her face, and her lips trembled as she spoke of a most terrifying possibility—one that amounted to high treason to the people of Sauslind. “Then...someone close to His Majesty...brought him into contact with someone already infected, and that in turn transferred the virus to him...?”

The weight of everyone’s gazes as they gathered on me was oppressive.

“There’s something else,” I said. “If we assume that Jean was the one who infected Duchess Rosalia, then it’s possible that the enemy

already knows what the source of the Ashen Nightmare is.”

If we were to assume that they’d brought His Majesty and Duchess Rosalia in contact with someone who already had the Ashen Nightmare, or the source that originally caused it, then the way things had played out in the capital suddenly made more sense. The reason we were on the cusp of war was that His Majesty had fallen ill, the plague had broken out in the capital, and fingers had been pointed at Maldura.

The pro-war faction stood to gain the most from such a move, and they were the most hostile toward Maldura. They wished to halt attempts at diplomacy between our nations for their own benefit. His Highness had also mentioned strange trade movements on the open seas, and a mastermind that had yet to be unveiled. My mind began going through those in the capital who might be responsible for all of this, but I quickly shook my head. Now was no time to be focusing on that; we had an epidemic to stop.

“Having said all this, that theory does have a couple of holes in it. Namely because I was never infected with the Ashen Nightmare,” I said.

Mabel furrowed her brows in confusion.

“One of our enemy’s objectives is supposedly to dispose of me, but I never fell ill. That brings us to two possibilities. One is that they attempted to infect me but failed, which would mean I have some measure of resistance to the plague within me that Duchess Rosalia did not. The other is...” I lifted my gaze, staring straight into Lady Gene’s chestnut-colored eyes. “That the enemy doesn’t have any clues about a possible cure either.”

“That makes sense,” Lord Alan declared, snapping his fingers. “The enemy wants to keep this epidemic going. They want to hit Maldura with all they’ve got to show how mighty our armies are, and this is the perfect opportunity to do just that. This also allows them to stop any attempts at diplomacy. They sure don’t need a cure getting in the way of that.”

Indeed. Maldura had come to Sauslind, despite decades upon decades of hostilities between our two nations, because they were desperate for some way to combat the Ashen Nightmare. If the enemy’s objective was to put Maldura in its place through military might, a cure would be a hindrance.

“Hm...?” Lord Alan paused, his face twisting as though he’d arrived upon some contradiction in this explanation. “But wouldn’t it actually be more convenient for our enemy to get their hands on a clue for a cure? They’d be lauded as saviors if they were able to rescue His Majesty, and a cure could even be used as a powerful weapon to cow Maldura. Right?”

“Well...” I started to respond, but Maldura’s prince, Prince Irvin, snorted and interrupted me.

“We’re talkin’ about a faction that wants nothing more than to crush Maldura under its heel. Let’s say they do figure out a cure and save your king. Do you really think they’d be willing to share that with us afterward? If they were so eager to keep up appearances as humanitarians after Sauslind helped Maldura in the past, I’m sure we’d have had some room for negotiation. But these people want to sever any diplomacy between our countries for good, right?”

If news were to spread domestically or abroad that we had found a cure, or even a clue to a possible cure for the Ashen Nightmare, anyone and everyone would be desperate to get their hands on it. As Prince Irvin had mentioned, Sauslind had taken a humanitarian approach before by supporting Maldura in the face of an upcoming cold wave. They would be pressured to do the same in this instance, surely. Our enemy wouldn’t approve of that, not when their entire goal was to snuff out any ties of friendship between our nations.

On the other hand, the enemy had come up with a good cover story. They’d pinned the blame for this on Maldura and spread the Ashen Nightmare through the capital. Relations between our countries were already strained due to our storied past, and we had no real obligation to give them help. We could turn our backs on them. However, would it really make sense to abandon them when we had helped them out before? A cure would put our country in an extremely favorable position, so would we still want to go to war with Maldura when they were already being ravaged by an epidemic? There would be no way for them to win. And what would neighboring nations think of such actions? What would our people think?

After a short period of silence, Lord Alan said, “I get it now.” He breathed a heavy sigh. “There are more benefits for them in erasing all traces of a possible cure before word gets out. And as soon as they discovered it was possible that one might be found, they couldn’t touch Lady Elianna.”

“Hah.” Prince Irvin let out a strangled laugh. His smile twisted into something bitter. “You’re too naïve.”

Mabel cocked her head, unsure of what Irvin meant by that. “But,” she said, “even assuming Jean did hold the source of the disease with him, he wasn’t affected by it either. Might we assume that he, or rather the enemy, already has access to a cure or at least some way of preventing infection? Might that be why he didn’t have the Ashen Nightmare?”

Once again, before I could answer, Lord Alan blurted, “No. If that were the case, they would have already done away with Lady Elianna a long time ago. There would be no need to have her lead them to any

clues for a cure..." He trailed off, but then he added, "Actually, I find it difficult to believe they hold the actual source of the Ashen Nightmare in their possession. I suspect Duchess Rosalia contracted it naturally, which would mean, on that front at least, Jean is innocent."

If Jean had possessed the source of the disease and a cure for it, then there would have been no reason not to make sure both Duchess Rosalia and I were infected. Even assuming I managed to stay healthy, he could have killed me himself. Instead, he'd left me to hunt down the only clue we had. He would only have done that because he didn't have access to either of the aforementioned things—neither the source of the plague nor its cure.

It was probably foolish to waste time coming up with proof of a man's innocence after he had turned a blade on me, intending to end my life, but I couldn't avert my eyes from such unpleasantness, not when any information could possibly bring us one step closer to our goal.

As the room fell silent, my thoughts wandered to a question that still niggled at my mind. The Ashen Nightmare was supposed to be a terrifying disease to anyone and everyone. But if one knew how it originated, would one be able to prevent it? What were Jean's intentions in burning Furya's Jar?

As I ruminated, Prince Irvin let out a breathy sigh. "Honestly," he grumbled. "You're like the lion that has parasites growing inside its body, or a king who raises an enemy within his own walls. Not that it's really my place to be sayin' this. Anyway, the signs match up all too well. I think it's safe for us to assume that the disease has some connection to the mines and the minerals in them." Prince Irvin then paused and shook his head. "But then it doesn't make any sense why it's not spread to anyone abroad. Does the sea water have something to do with it, I wonder...?"

My jaw dropped. "Just now... What did you say?"

"Wha? I'm just sayin' I think we should look into mines and minerals more as a possible source for the disease."

"No..." I began, and though I meant to follow up with the words, "Not that part," they didn't leave my mouth. The second the possibility popped into my mind, my thoughts suddenly began spinning so violently I felt dizzy, as if I were inebriated. "Corba Village... The Milulu Clam..." I muttered to myself.

Everyone else regarded me with perplexed looks.

The realizations I hit upon haunted my thoughts so much that I began babbling about them, only half-aware of what I was saying. "Religion and the flower, the parasites growing inside the lion's body. The author Sean penned a philosophical book titled *Faith and Paintings*, in which he examined people's lifestyles through religious

paintings. It was in the pages of said book that he mentioned a story about a lion growing parasites inside its body.”

My gaze wandered to Lady Gene as I recalled the details of the story depicted in the book. I studied her eyes, imagining myself leafing through the pages of Furya’s Jar, which she held within her.

“The phrase is more modernly used as a metaphor to describe a person who harbors a destructive enemy in their midst, but the story originates from a religion in one of the eastern countries. Even the strongest of lions can be felled if parasites are devouring it from the inside. Thus, the lion has developed a method by which to combat these fiends. It rests its body beneath tree peonies. It is said that the evening dew from them drives away parasites. Therefore, the lion and tree peony are often pictured together in the east...”

The story reminded me of Sean Markeld, who’d authored many such religious texts, and it was as if one of the doubts that had weighed on me for the longest time was finally solved.

“The Azul Region is just beside this one, and there, Corba Village had the lowest transmission rates of the plague in the country. There were rumors that any who fell ill were isolated and buried away from the village proper, but since we have verified their exact numbers, that doesn’t hold water. The stories the survivors have told about how they handled the epidemic do not differ in any significant way from any other village in our realm. So what makes them different?”

By that same token, why had Duchess Rosalia fallen ill, while I had not? What was the difference between us? My answer was the sample I’d been repeatedly attempting to create since last autumn, a sample that used ingredients only obtainable from Corba Village.

“The Azul Region’s Tessen River flows down from the northern mountain range, converging with the Mil River to form the only tributary where Milulu Clams can be harvested. These clams aren’t the most suitable for consumption, but they can be used to craft goods. Since Corba Village is so destitute, the clams are a vital source of food for them, and those that can’t be sold are fashioned into toys for the children.”

“Yes, and...?” Mabel still looked utterly baffled as to why I was bringing this up. Her shoulders jumped when someone else cried out in surprise. Lord Alan’s voice was so loud that I feared we might invoke the ire of one of the inn’s residents again.

“The ink! That’s right. I helped out with that too. The clam’s ink is barely visible when you put it on paper, but if you get it on your hands, the red color stains them for a while. And the duchess got sick with the Ashen Nightmare while Lady Elianna didn’t...” Lord Alan paused. “But, um, so what?”

His excitement all but dissipated as he was left instead with

confusion over what connection these two things could possibly have. I was also nearly jumping out of my skin with this revelation, and I had to force myself to show some restraint and stay calm. Letting my emotions get the best of me wouldn't do us any good, nor could I draw immediate conclusions either. I had to keep a broad view, follow this clue I'd discovered, and tie it together with Lady Gene's knowledge of the topic.

"At the time, researchers pored over all the differences they could find between Corba Village and other affected areas. The Milulu Clam was one such difference, but while they looked into the meat contained within, they did not look into the outer shell. It was the outer shell I used to produce my ink. It's possible I could have ingested some of it orally since it stuck to my fingers, or it could have entered my body through a cut. I suspect now that what we really should have been looking at was the shell."

Medicine helped defeat the source of a disease within the body, similar to how the lion digested the evening dew from the tree peony to vanquish the parasites inside its body. What I pictured in my mind was the red color of ink that had stained my hands. The people of Corba Village had likely ingested that pigment without knowing, and perhaps it had battled any illness inside of them.

Lady Gene's chestnut-colored eyes stared at me unblinkingly. I continued sharing what knowledge I possessed.

"I have read medical texts about practices dating back to ancient times that involve soaking in a medicinal bath to cure illnesses. This method is used to treat skin diseases as well as back pain and joint pain. Although not related to medicine or healing, there is also a practice in the world of using henna or tattoos to dye the skin of special couriers so that they may be easily identified. The ancient mummies at rest in the lands of the southern continent were created by applying special oil to the skin to prevent the deceased from decomposing. Human skin is influenced by what it absorbs from the outside. Such stories also appear in mythology. For instance, there was a girl with a large birthmark on her face, but when she washed her face in the spring where the Goddess's flower blooms, it immediately disappeared. Word spread that the Yule flower was the one that had appeared at this miraculous spring. Also..."

Before I could go on any further, Lady Gene lifted a hand to stop me. She was still staring at me unblinkingly, her probing gaze refusing to accept what I was suggesting, yet I could see in her eyes that all of the puzzle pieces I'd given her were beginning to fall into place.

Lady Gene frowned, implying she still doubted it herself, but everything we knew led us to only one answer. "Are you trying to imply that the Ashen Nightmare is a skin disease?"

The other three were gobsmacked as they stared at the two of us. I swallowed hard. "I believe it is a possibility."

The Ashen Nightmare began with the same initial symptoms as a cold. That was why everyone took the same measures they did when combating a cold to deal with it. But what if something radically differed between the two, as Chief Herbalist Nigel had suspected?

Lady Gene mumbled, "A skin disease is... No, any disease has internal and external causes. The Ashen Nightmare turns the skin an ashen color. That's because the source of the disease has already entered the body, and the infected has succumbed to it. You also warned people that the Ashen Nightmare could be transmitted orally, but diseases attach themselves to a body without being noticed and find their way inside. That can be person-to-person contact, consuming contaminated food, or even breathing the same air as the infected. But...if the Ashen Nightmare is actually a skin disease...then methods to combat or prevent it must have also been absorbed through the skin...?"

She paused, then nearly jumped, her voice rising an octave as she gasped, "That's right! My grandmother said it herself. Illnesses are living things. Just as they evolve in order to survive, other things in the world evolve in order to combat them. Kenneth's Herb must be one of them. So is the Milulu Clam and... Which means...? We can combat the disease from outside the body... We could use ointments, skin absorption treatments... No, that won't work. Whatever substance is able to combat the Ashen Nightmare is made within the body after the intake of whatever is in those clam shells. That's right. In that case..."

There was a loud shuffling of paper as Lady Gene grabbed the recipes she'd been looking at and smoothed them out on the table. Her face normally revealed little in the way of emotion, but her cheeks reddened with excitement now.

"One is for diagnosis, the other is for suppressing symptoms. That's right... I was an idiot. The answer was right here under my nose. The clam is the key to combating this epidemic, so if we used it to make a preventative medicine... But, wait. The Pomelo Fruit is said to be effective at preventing it, and attempts have been made to use it in order to make a cure for a long time now. But it was always unsuccessful because full protection against the Ashen Nightmare was never guaranteed."

Her eyes were those of a researcher lost in her notes, gleaming as she surveyed the papers in front of her again.

"Kenneth's Herb... If we collect what's left of it around Hersche, then... No, that won't work. There would never be enough of it, and we haven't done any clinical trials to back up its effectiveness because

it's not widely known enough to do so. Ralshen is a rather minor region. I was shocked that someone like the Cannibal Princess even knew about Kenneth's Herb. But we can't use it. So what about the Milulu Clam instead? The residents of Corba Village are themselves clinical samples. They've consumed the substance and demonstrated it has no harmful effect. Yes... Yeah, that's it."

This time it was not me but Lady Gene who was so immersed in her work that she was verbally dumping out every little thought that crossed her mind.

"In herbology, preventing a disease and combating one may seem similar, but they're not. Likewise, the way a disease affects a person can change based on their body's ability to fight it off. That's why, up until this point, neither the Pomelo Fruit nor Kenneth's Herb could be used as a cure for everyone who was infected. But Corba Village was an isolated place where both the elderly and children came into contact with the Milulu Clams, and they are the most at risk of infection. But this is proof that even they could ingest that substance without being harmed by it. In which case..."

Lady Gene's chestnut-colored eyes filled with a brilliant light, indicating that at long last she'd found something of substance to guide us. I could tell by the way she went on and on that she was building toward a concrete plan. She bolted out of her chair and charged at me, her expression like that of a greedy street urchin.

"I can make it," she said. "I can make the cure... I want those Milulu Clams."

Her eyes were undeniably those of an obsessed researcher. There was a thirst in her—a hunger. The way her hands twitched so restlessly made it seem as though she was eager to immediately dissect me so that she might find the answer of how to combat the Ashen Nightmare. For all my boldness, I instinctively flinched back even as I nodded, acquiescing to her request.

Despite the late hour, our group immediately began to prepare to act on what we'd uncovered. At least until Prince Irvin sharply cut in, causing all of us to freeze. He pushed himself off the wall and reached for the hilt of his sword. Every single one of us held our breaths as we waited. Mabel slipped in front of me, trying to keep me hidden behind her back.

All of our attention was drawn to the same thing. Outside the room, in the dark and silent corridor, came the almost imperceptible echo of faint, approaching footsteps.

Chapter 3: Those Who Dream

I had a dream.

There was a rancid smell, one born of rotting table scraps, sewage, sweat, and pungent perfume. The building was stained with all manner of filth. The Big One would occasionally come to punch me, spreading that foul stench around them.

Yes, as far back as I can remember, my world was dominated by smell.

One day, the Small One that was with me suddenly stopped moving. A cloying scent permeated the air around them. But this stench was just one of many I'd caught a whiff of before in this world. It was after this that the Big One began beating me more frequently. More often than before, I found myself paralyzed from the pain of my injuries. The air around me filled with a smell akin to rust, but there was something else too—the same odor the Small One had produced before they went completely stiff forever.

This was when I realized something. I was immensely smaller than the Big One, and the Big One always trampled on what was smaller. Violence was how they exercised authority. It was the same way I or any other person might crush the insects crawling underfoot. This was how the world operated.

There was a rancid smell, yes, and it was also accompanied by verbal abuse and mocking laughter. The light that shone here was not the gentle warm rays of the midsummer sun. It was the opposite—overpowering, uncomfortable, blinding. The brighter the light, the darker the shadows, and indeed, the shadows that scattered were dark as pitch, like an endless abyss. And they too were putrid.

From the moment I was born into this world, I'd spent my entire life with this odor. I was sure that, just as it had been here when I arrived, it would be with me when I died.

Everything changed when a different Big One appeared. Despite the fetid stench that clung to me, this Big One outstretched a hand to me. My life was like a pile of garbage covered in muck and insect-infested, something no one else would even blink twice at. While no one else wanted to intervene, this Big One stepped up.

They told me something strange too. They told me that, one day, I would reach the place of my dreams—one that would belong to me and me alone. On the cusp of death at the time, I couldn't fathom

what that meant.

My world slowly began to crack open after that.

I learned there are Big Ones and Ones With Power. Although these two concepts seemed the same on the surface, I came to understand they were different. Those who were stronger than me could be felled by others with a different strength. Yes, that's right. I realized there were different types of power. But, I wondered, how was this pattern any different from the one I'd suffered from up until this point?

When I asked the Big One who saved me this question, they said something to me. It was a question, I think, one along the lines of, "Do you hate those who wield their power? Or do you not?" I didn't feel either way, honestly. Big Ones exerted authority through violence. Small Ones got trampled under foot. That was how the world worked. It was pointless no matter how I answered. The world wasn't going to magically change based on my preferences.

"So that's your answer," responded the Big One who picked me up, flashing the same smile they'd worn when they first rescued me.

For some reason—I wasn't sure why—my heart began to beat a fraction faster. It hadn't really ever done that before.

"I won't abandon you."

Those words were like a hand at my back, pushing me forward. The events that transpired back then were what led me to where I found myself in the present.

For a split second, I registered the sound of something cutting through the air. My body moved on trained reflex, not because I actually understood that what was whizzing toward me was dangerous. A small knife pierced the wall behind me, its blade sharp enough to have sliced clean through my neck. It was only belatedly that I recognized the murderous eyes glowering at me.

"You've gotta be fuckin' kidding me, Jean. You bastard."

With every blink of my eyes, I felt myself settle back into reality.

We were in a small lodge on a snowy mountain, with no fire in sight. The chill that crept along the ground was frigid enough that any ordinary person would be chattering and trembling, but the few people around me were still as statues.

The person staring at me with such open hostility was a man the same age as me. His muscular appearance combined with the menacing gleam in his eyes was so intimidating that any civilian would have immediately given him a wide berth on the street.

Personally, and perhaps heedlessly, I thought such unadulterated animosity toward someone who was merely standing there and blinking was rather unbecoming of someone whose livelihood consisted of covert missions—never mind how hypocritical it made me to entertain such opinions.

“You listenin’?” the man snarled at me. “If you hadn’t gotten in our way before, we’d be done with this mission by now. This...is all your fault.”

Back then... I turned the words over in my mind, groping back through my memories to locate this instance he was referring to. *Aha. That time.*

There was something familiar about how nimbly he’d flung his knife at me a moment ago, and now I understood why. He was currently shrouded in thick, if not simplistic, arctic clothing, and beneath all those layers hid a wound I’d given him. I’d had a good reason for it, but for the moment, I decided to bow my head apologetically.

“Sorry ’bout that.”

My response only fanned the flames of his anger. Just as I could sense a threatening presence begin to advance toward me, several sighs rang out around us. Our group only exchanged as many words as were absolutely necessary, but despite their usual reticence, even they had enough sense to intervene with words of admonishment.

That time... The words echoed in my head again. He and the others had attacked the future crown princess’s carriage as we were headed to quell the nearby rebellion. Surrounded by their blades, our target had swallowed back her fear and resolutely stood against them, trading some brief words before one man lifted his sword to cut her down. That man was our current leader and a former Shadow of the royal family, Watteau.

Though the two of us were much the same in many regards, his unique physical characteristics had confined him to working behind the scenes. That is to say, beneath his mask was an enormous burn that stretched across his mouth. Thus, he operated from the shadows while I, who lacked any such distinctive features, worked in the open.

We were the same age, we had the same level of ability, and we were both Shadows for the royal family, yet our roles were clearly different. I suspected that was the reason Watteau persistently went out of his way to quarrel with me.

As Watteau clicked his tongue at me, I finally realized perhaps I hadn’t explained myself enough, so, I added, “It was too early back then to off the young miss.”

“What, so that’s why you put your shortsword in my arm?”

“Yup,” came my inevitably half-hearted response. “I had to do it.”

A silent, palpable anger emanated from Watteau, and I immediately regretted opening my mouth at all. When he did speak, his voice was quiet, cold, and filled with hatred. “Young miss, huh? Did you forget our mission this time is to finish her off? But rather than end her life like you were supposed to, you set the house she was

in on fire and left her there. That's pretty shoddy work, Jean."

There was an unspoken implication in his words; he was implying I'd slacked off—that I'd purposefully stopped short of finishing the job. It was already established that if any of us violated our orders, our peers were allowed to impose whatever punishment they saw fit.

Tension filled the air, only to be undercut by my dry quip.

"Guess so, but considerin' you failed to finish off Maldura's prince, you're sittin' in the same boat as me."

Those of us who'd resolved to defect from our position as Shadows of the royal family had been given two orders. The first was to eliminate the crown prince's betrothed, Elianna Bernstein. The second was to frame her murder on Maldura's prince who was suspected of having entered our borders incognito or, failing that, to kill him as well.

However, at the time Elianna's carriage was attacked, I'd had no intention of harming her. I had my own individual instructions, and in order to accomplish them, I had to separate her from those annoying Black Wing Knights. That was why I'd leaked their information to Watteau's team. Only a handful of us had defected. The rest were brought in from the outside, and they were the ones most caught off guard to see Elianna's Shadows brandishing their blades at us.

Watteau and his men had originally been attending to a different mission, so when they suddenly appeared out of thin air attacking the carriage, Elianna's Shadows were likewise—and understandably—shaken and confused. I too hesitated before launching my dagger at him, wondering if he was acting under orders I wasn't yet privy to.

"Use any means to achieve our goal. That's our creed, yeah?"

Although we understood each other's positions, there was still an underlying difference in how we viewed things and the methods we used to achieve objectives. My mission was to locate any clues regarding a cure to the Ashen Nightmare and to expunge them without leaving any trace behind. To that end, I couldn't allow Elianna to be killed at that point in time. That was why I'd intervened and attacked Watteau.

From Watteau's perspective, our mission would be complete as long as we killed Elianna. There would be no need to worry about anyone discovering any clues to a cure once she was gone, or so he believed. The ends justified the means no matter how many sacrifices had to be made—that was his position on the matter. He wasn't wrong. Those were the rules of the world we'd lived in thus far, the ones we'd carved into our very souls as we took up this line of work.

The most recent incident on this snowy mountain was, in fact, the next golden opportunity for us to complete our mission. What had started off as light powdering had turned into a full-blown blizzard,

which only made the situation all the more favorable for us.

The Malduran prince, Irvin, had been keeping a watchful eye on me, though he'd been careful not to let his wariness show too openly. I'd noticed his suspicions about me, but I left the task of dealing with him up to Watteau and his men.

I had every intention of fulfilling my mission at first. I was going to put an end to it all—kill Elianna and destroy any evidence that might lead anyone to a cure. Those were my exact orders. Everything would quite literally be over once I accomplished that.

Alas, both Watteau and I had miscalculated. I had failed to finish off Elianna, while Watteau and his other fellow defectors had similarly found themselves unable to off the Malduran prince. This had set both of us back.

The embers that lit this particular fire had started forty-some years ago when Dowager Queen Amalia began nursing a grudge against the royal family. As more time passed, those embers grew only fiercer, giving birth to flames. Someone else had taken up her mantle even after her death, and this person, much like their predecessor, was someone very close to the royal family.

Watteau clicked his tongue again, his tone caustic and biting as he snapped, "You get it, don't ya?" He made no attempt to hide the hatred in his voice as he went on. "Our mission here is to eradicate the crown prince's betrothed, Elianna Bernstein. It's not the end of the world if we leave the Malduran prince alive."

If we didn't finish him off, then those in the capital could instead use his captured older brother as leverage against him. Although Watteau hadn't explicitly said anything on the matter, the way he spoke inadvertently indicated the intentions of the mastermind behind this whole plot.

It wasn't only a chill that permeated the air in the room; a silent tension had fallen between us as well. In spite of the cold all around us, fiery emotion boiled inside of Watteau, until at last it brimmed over in the form of words.

"We have to kill Elianna Bernstein here," Watteau said venomously, his gaze on me. "Jean, it's your job to finish her. For good this time." Thus was his final pronouncement on the matter. The gleam in his eyes emphasized that failure would not be tolerated.

I'd spent more time with Elianna Bernstein than any other target before, and in spite of that proximity, I'd missed my chance to end her life only a short time ago. It was obvious to everyone that Watteau suspected me of disloyalty. He most likely thought that I'd developed some affection for her—that the reason I'd stopped short of killing her was that I'd experienced a flicker of compassion. Perhaps he even thought that, circumstances permitting, I'd betray them all. It

wouldn't surprise me if such doubts had entered his mind.

Unable to really concentrate on what was happening, my thoughts wandering too much, I almost let another half-hearted response slip from my mouth. I managed to bite it back at the last second, opting instead to simply nod.

Watteau's intense gaze remained glued to me for a short while, but soon enough, he and his comrades launched into a discussion, going over our current circumstances and what options were available to us now.

Unbeknownst to Elianna herself, she actually had fairly tight security around her. The royal family's Shadows were no fools. The moment they'd sensed a change within their order, they would've flushed out any other traitors before moving on to the next step. It was due to their preoccupation with this incident that Elianna had been at her most vulnerable when visiting the witch's house on the mountain. That had been the most ideal opportunity for me to complete my mission.

"..."

I stood there numbly, watching the others talk without any regard for the freezing air that had wrapped itself around us.

We had all withdrawn for fear of being spotted by any of the townspeople. As a result, our target had survived the assault and retreated back to the town. Thus, one question arose: should we give chase and attack her at her inn, then? We'd have to be sure to finish her if we did, because if we let her live again, rumors would start spreading. Our objective was to ruin Elianna's reputation and frame her death in such a way that all signs pointed to Maldura being the culprit.

Although Watteau, myself, and others had defected, there were still those who remained loyal to the royal family. We could also reasonably assume that, having realized the exodus of the traitors, those loyal would have already refilled their ranks. Things were already bad enough, but if they were having this much trouble already, it would be no simple task to deal with the Malduran prince either.

So, what to do then? Judging by the course of the conversation, the others were advocating to dispose of Elianna now before the reinforcement Shadows attending her arrived. For the second time already since coming to this little cabin, I found myself tuning them out, as if my mind was wandering elsewhere.

When I closed my eyes, I could feel the fiery flames that had raged around me earlier. I recalled the moment when I'd told the young miss, "The dream is over." Even I found my response strange. What dream? Since when had I started dreaming? Seemed a little late at this

age, after I knew how cruel and unforgiving the world was. What, then, was I dreaming? Were Watteau's suspicions not entirely unfounded? Had I experienced some change of heart?

The young miss was sometimes called the Bibliophile Princess by others. She'd sought Furya's Jar so desperately, and I'd thrown it into the flames—watched as they devoured what she desired most. The burning of a book was something she could never abide—something she could never forgive me for doing. In spite of that, Watteau actually thought I could return to my spot at her side. That was only because he knew nothing about her.

But I did.

I knew that using my position as a Shadow of the royal family to betray her and point a blade at her was a less serious offense in her eyes. No, my more heinous sin was far crueler than that.

The young miss had stuck firmly to her beliefs. She'd worked tirelessly to find a method by which she might stop the war that was brewing, and it was in her pursuit that she had found the research journal that housed a promising lead for a cure for the Ashen Nightmare. And I'd taken it all from her. I'd let the flames swallow an invaluable tome in front of a dedicated bookworm like her. It was laughable to think Watteau believed I could come back from that.

I felt a strangled, bitter groan ready to escape my throat, but before it could make its way out, the others in the room suddenly moved, indicating that they'd finally settled on a course of action. There were six former Shadows—the defectors. The others we'd recruited from outside our order. Including those who'd been assigned to keep watch over the inn or relay information, there were sixteen of us altogether. That was all that was left after our brush with the realm's defenders, the Black Wing Knights. But that would be sufficient.

"This time, we will finish her off for good. I mean it," said Watteau, voice full of confidence and determination. His words served as a reminder for the rest of us, pushing us to reaffirm our own resolve.

The others responded not with words but with firm nods. Following their example, I reeled myself back into my body—back into that frigid cabin with its ice-cold floors and the gentle caress of the chilly air.

Those forced to live in such an adverse environment had no choice but to harden themselves, to wrap themselves in thick impenetrable walls in hopes it might protect them.



Women are strong.

Those three words had become painfully obvious to me as of late.

“We must open the royal stockpiles in the southern Guise Domain. We have already made an inventory of its current holdings. Even should our mean treasury here in the capital dry up, we have calculated that the one in the south will be able to supplement our reserves for several years if required. Lastly, the Financial Affairs Office is currently in discussion about a new taxation system for Guise and will notify you in due course. That is all.”

Having said his piece, a man with brilliant blond hair and vibrant sky-blue eyes took a seat in his chair. The elegance of his conduct and the intensity of his presence was intimidating enough to frighten most from even approaching him. These were perhaps fitting qualities for Prince Christopher, given he was next in line for Sauslind’s throne.

“P-Please wait a moment!” The other man in the room, a noble who enjoyed a prominent position, shot out of his seat, practically clinging to the prince as he protested. “Pardon my impudence for saying this, but the Guise Domain requires a certain minimum in its reserves for use in several integral areas. Namely, for trade with southern neighbors, for the development of new sea routes, and in times of emergency, to combat pirates. It is all the more important that we maintain our current reserves in case any of our neighbors should experience such an urgent situation that they would request our support. Guise’s policy has always been to be flexible and offer priority aid to those who—”

“Earl Tralles,” the prince interrupted. His quiet voice was like an arctic chill that dominated the entire room.

Despite the urgency of the present situation, the earl was trying to persuade the prince to maintain the status quo, so that the region might continue as is, bound by formality.

The wise, highly renowned crown prince stared straight at the man. No, not at him—*through* him. The pressure he exerted with his mere gaze would make anyone gulp.

“What we are experiencing right now is what I would call an ‘urgent situation,’” continued the prince, his voice low and commanding, “or do you disagree?”

The stockpile in question was designated as part of the royal treasury. Given the ongoing national crisis, the prince wanted its doors opened to provide relief to the civilians. His argument was completely sound, yet the pale Earl Tralles refused to back down.

“Yes, but still...”

I almost wanted to commend him for being so courageous, but any respect I may have had for his bravery was lost the moment he continued speaking.

“B-But would that not...be akin to turning your back on your

mother's side of the family...?"

The stockpile contained goods stored as part of the royal family's domain. Earl Tralles was merely in an administrative position over said stockpile, and in spite of the crisis at hand, he was insinuating that he couldn't follow royal orders to release it. Why would that be? The answer was all too obvious. All one had to do was follow the maritime trade routes and their resulting profits to see who was behind this.

I hissed under my breath, tempted to close my eyes so I didn't have to see where this was going. No matter how much Earl Tralles wanted to resist orders, he'd picked the exact wrong words to do it.

"Earl Tralles. Answer me this. Who do you serve? This country and its royal family? Or someone else?" The prince's voice was like a cobalt blade covered in frost, and the way he wielded his words was akin to pointing that blade at the earl's neck. As if to drive home the point that he would brook no further protest, the prince said, "I want this arrangement in writing by the end of today."

The tense atmosphere had us all rooted in place. Aside from the petrified earl, the prince was attended by several of his personal guard, which I, Glen Eisenach, oversaw as commander. As of late, all of us had been on a razor's edge, our wariness of our surroundings more heightened than ever before.

Since the king became ill, the present and future of the realm fell heavily on the young prince's shoulders. It was vexing to watch helplessly at his side as he bore such crushing responsibility all on his own.

No sooner did the prince leave the room than another civil servant came rushing after us to go over the next proposal and documents that required the prince's immediate signature. Prince Christopher continued down the corridor, responding to each matter the civil servant brought up in as few words as possible.

The current situation had robbed the crown prince of the handsome smile that all the ladies had once revered, though that did nothing to diminish his popularity. The girls in the palace found the chillingly cold atmosphere that pervaded the air around him to be equally appealing in its own right.

As I gazed at our country's prince from behind, I found myself curious. Was he actually as calm as he suggested, or was he silently fuming? Even as his childhood friend, I couldn't discern the difference. The one thing I could tell was that Earl Tralles had agitated him. The prince had tried to be fair with him, only for the earl to act obstinately. I couldn't blame him for snapping.

The one thing that was certain was that Earl Tralles was part of Duke Odin's faction. Just as he'd shown deference to Duke Odin in his

appeals to the prince, so too did the rest of the palace seem eager to throw their lot in with the duke. It was as if everyone had accepted that it was inevitable the prince would take Lady Pharmia as his betrothed.

Likewise, ever since the night Duke Odin told him, “It’s your duty to see that your royal blood continues,” Chris had closed himself off emotionally. Not even a hint of a feigned smile had been seen on his lips since, and he’d ceased jesting the way he once had as well. At night, he barely rested. Those of us who stuck close at his side could attest to that.

It was, perhaps, inevitable that his unexpressed frustrations were being directed at the person who wasn’t present. He had to be wondering what on earth Alexei was doing right now.

The only person who could truly save Chris at this point was Lady Elianna, though. She was also the only one capable of breaking the current deadlock here at the palace. While I had no doubt that many unforeseen circumstances had cropped up in Ralshen, Alexei wasn’t the type to sit back quietly and watch it all happen. Alas, what information did make it to the capital wasn’t promising. Was that an indication that, even with his amazing intellect and abilities, even Alexei was out of his depth? Or did this further point to the enemy making another move against us?

The situation was so vexing I could hardly stand it. If only we could get some clue as to what was happening with Lady Elianna—anything at all. Oh how I wished I could leave the palace in Chris’s place and race there to Ralshen to confirm for myself that she had survived. Then I could bring her back here, and surely things would be so much better for it. Chris would be at ease knowing she was safe and close.

But what if...what if the reports turned out to be true? What if the worst thing imaginable had transpired? What would happen to Chris then?

I clenched my fist, which had become a bad habit as of late.

As we continued ambling down the hall, I spotted someone else making their way toward us. Chris seemed to spot them as well, though he continued giving instructions to the civil servant at his side, his expression unchanged. The other party stopped short out of courtesy to the crown prince, giving a light nod by way of greeting as he waited for Chris and his entourage to pass. For his part, Chris didn’t even blink twice as he passed by the man. He treated this man the same as he would anyone else, in spite of the fact that he was the father of Chris’s betrothed—the woman whose whereabouts and survival still remained in question.

Their completely ordinary, almost indifferent exchange instantly

soothed my frazzled nerves. My thoughts immediately wandered to the events two months prior, when I sat in on a meeting between them...

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At the beginning of the new year, a meeting was conducted in secret—one that was only held after news arrived from Sauslind’s historic enemy, Maldura. Chris steeled himself and attended what turned out to be an extremely brief conference. The only people he brought along with him were Alexei and myself.

I felt no small amount of nervousness—and admittedly some bitterness as well—about one of the other attendees.

“So you plan to entrust this clue to Elianna? That’s the decision you have come to, Prince Christopher?”

The moment we entered and faced each other, this man immediately cut to the heart of the matter, dispensing with all pleasantries in the process. He was in his midforties and looked rather warm and carefree from the outside. Being part of the aristocracy, he also gave the impression of being very generous and open-minded. But in spite of the favorable first impression he offered, his eyes were ruthlessly scrutinizing.

Marquess Bernstein had managed to cut the treasury’s deficit completely, creating a surplus of funds instead. He was currently one of the most pivotal government figures in charge of the country’s finances. People often underestimated him due to his unassuming appearance, but he was one of the wisest men in the entire royal court.

The young man standing beside the marquess was his son and someone we considered a kind and close friend. Nonetheless, given that he was standing with his father, his position in regards to this matter was all too apparent.

“Yes,” Chris answered curtly, his voice hard.

Alexei stood only a step behind the prince. The expression on his face indicated that he found this exchange bizarre.

Originally, Chris was supposed to attend the annual winter memorial service held in the Ralshen Region. The king’s uncle, Lord Bernard, had once held the title of earl there, and part of the purpose of the visit was for Chris to pay the ailing man his respects. But this had all been disrupted when that emergency missive from Maldura arrived. The prince’s betrothed, Lady Elianna, was instead set to go in his place. Chris had already called the Black Wing Knights, one of the realm’s standing armies, back to the capital. Their imposing presence would leave an impact on the visiting Maldurans, and they would also leave with Lady Elianna to act as her armed escort.

Alexei and I were already aware of this much, of course, but the way Chris and Marquess Bernstein spoke to one another implied there was some other information we weren't yet privy to. No sooner did I wonder what this could be than the marquess let slip a furtive, faint chuckle.

Though widely regarded to be a great and wise prince, Chris reflexively scowled at the marquess. It seemed that even he let his emotions slip when it came to dealing with a longtime nemesis. His was a grudge that had only grown more and more bitter over time. He'd sounded aloof a moment ago when he first responded, but as he spoke now, his voice dripped with anger.

"I must admit, words fail me. All I can say is that I applaud how insidiously clever your little ruse was. First, you submit reports showing increased tax revenues and expenditures on maritime trade, but there are inconsistencies with the number of vessels relative to the reported tax revenue. Not to mention, the books detail an increase in ships from Miseral and the West, among other notable discrepancies. Any actual pertinent information you interspersed among irrelevant details, such as trending marine products that have been introduced into the market, accounts on the influx of human resources, and tax revenue reports. Yes, the way it was done was so loathsome, I should be forgiven for wondering if it wasn't done purposefully to prevent me from noticing."

Chris managed to restrain his sarcasm, if only barely, but the message was clear: If you had noticed there were problems, you should have highlighted the specific issues sooner. But although the prince had admonished Marquess Bernstein, the marquess continued smiling the same as he had before.

"My, my, Your Highness, I might understand you taking pride in figuring everything out if you had done so from only one or two reports, but only realizing after poring over years and years of records is hardly something to brag about."

Marquess Bernstein's response was similarly sarcastic, the unspoken insinuation being: You should have realized sooner, you half-wit.

I could feel a cold sweat starting to trickle down my back. In spite of how incensed Chris was, boiling with rage beneath the surface, the tanuki—rather, Marquess Bernstein—maintained the same placid facade.

"Besides, I only reported on one of many seeds of corruption. Which of them sprout will depend on the movement of the tides...as well as who steps in to coax them to blossom. Though surely you are already well aware of this, are you not, Your Highness?"

Chris swallowed hard, his hands clenched at his side. Even those

of us in his inner circle more or less understood what the marquess was hinting at. Ever since Chris was a child, he'd been particularly wary of one specific person—his mother's brother, Duke Odin. This conversation implied that Duke Odin would be the one putting political schemes into motion soon. However, it was precisely because Chris was so mistrustful of the duke that he'd summoned General Bakula, who was close to Lady Elianna already.

While I tried to remain optimistic, I noticed Alexei gritting his teeth beside me. He had been closest to Chris ever since we were children, and he'd learned much about the workings of the royal court and its inhabitants in that time. If his reaction was anything to go by, perhaps the situation had already developed beyond the point we could affect any change.

"You..." Chris snarled, "you could have stopped this ahead of time, and instead..." He was clenching his jaw so hard that his words came out in a hiss between his teeth. One normally wouldn't see this side of Chris, and I could only guess he was expressing his genuine indignance, not as a prince of our country but as one man to another. "You really plan to send your own flesh and blood—your daughter, Elianna—into that snake pit?"

The hostility in his voice was so intense that my hand nearly flew to the hilt of my sword without thinking. I barely managed to hold down my own wrist in time. Worried as I was that such animosity would be returned in kind, Marquess Bernstein's response was quiet and subdued.

"I would appreciate it if you would not repeat the same childish contradictions." The marquess gave the three of us a withering look; it was immediately apparent that he was not only admonishing Chris but the two of us as well.

In all honesty, the man had a point. Chris personally didn't want to send Lady Elianna to a place that was so inhospitable to members of the royal family. Unfortunately, given his position and the current situation, he was left with no other option. He knew well ahead of time that being with his beloved would mean putting her in danger, but he had gone ahead with his engagement to her anyway. Moreover, it was his own family member's ambitions and the changing of the tides that had brought about this situation, not Marquess Bernstein, but he couldn't help lashing out anyway. He was likely even aware that his anger was misplaced, yet he still couldn't stop. The resentment he felt was perhaps childish, but there was no one else for him to direct it at.

Both Marquess Bernstein and his son Alfred stood there quietly and watched. As I scrutinized the expressions on their faces, something occurred to me.

The Bernsteins had carried a hidden name since the time of the Hero King. Perhaps the reason they agreed to stay beside the royal family and serve was that they enjoyed offering support from the shadows without needing anything in return. They didn't want the attention, accolades, or material wealth that would have certainly fallen in their lap were their deeds to be openly known. They weren't royalty, after all, and they certainly weren't gods.

"Your Highness, what have you learned in the years since your birth? Were you taught to walk the path of foolish kings who came before you? To be vexed by your own inexperience while history repeats itself, only to continue relying upon the Bernsteins and their hidden name when anything goes wrong? Am I to understand that's the road you have chosen?" asked Marquess Bernstein.

He alluded to a basic, albeit philosophical, question: what purpose does a king serve? The marquess's intentions seemed to be genuine in that regard, but the intense atmosphere made it clear he wouldn't permit Chris to dodge the subject.

As the air in the room became more and more suffocatingly oppressive, Chris quietly said, "I spoke in error... I rescind what I said."

The first words they'd exchanged in this meeting were about entrusting the resolution of this matter to Lady Elianna. That was something both Marquess Bernstein and Chris had agreed to. Dredging up old grudges by bickering with the marquess was pointless and benefited no one. The fact that Chris did it anyway, unable to curtail his own emotions, was evidence of how inexperienced he still was—at least in the marquess's view.

"Well, this isn't the first time you have acted immaturely," said Marquess Bernstein with an openly derisive chuckle. "I suspect you will find that during Maldura's visit here, many ambitious ladies will flock to try to steal the spot at your side while Eli is absent. If I may be so bold as to add further supposition, I foresee the senior ministers council being in disarray as well." He paused, sounding even more mocking as he added, "Hm, how shall I put this? I guess you could say this is a natural consequence of your hasty, half-hearted attempt to meet the conditions my father and I set forth. Or perhaps, more aptly, I should say it's a rather predictable repercussion for the naive actions of someone still wet behind the ears."

The condition the marquess referred to was for Chris to win the approval of the aristocracy for his engagement to Lady Elianna without using the Bernstein's hidden name to accomplish that. Four years ago, Chris had done just that, but his success was superficial at best. The marquess was implying that unrest still smoldered beneath the surface in spite of Chris's supposed victory.

All three of us were taken aback by how the marquess snorted in laughter at Chris's expense, intentionally trying to provoke Chris's barely restrained anger. This man was an expert at taking control of the situation. Not even Chris stood a chance against him. Suddenly, I found myself nervous and sweating for an altogether new reason.

The marquess drank in our expressions. When he spoke next, his tone was less demeaning than before. "Well, I do respect you for the decision you have come to, at least, Prince Christopher." For a brief second, it almost sounded as though he was finally giving Chris some recognition...until he added, "That is, your decision to entrust the resolution of this to Elianna in spite of how desperately you have always cherished her."

Chris's emotions were probably more volatile in that moment than they'd ever been in his life. There was no trace of joy that the older man had given him an—admittedly backhanded—acknowledgment. Instead, there was pure, unadulterated rage—directed not at the marquess, but at himself. The very air around him seemed to turn black as pitch, smoldering with an unfathomable darkness as he cursed inwardly.

The two exchanged a few more words after that, but the meeting ended rather quickly.



Looking back at that exchange, I could finally understand Chris's resentment. I hadn't been able to at the time; after the meeting had ended, Alex and I had naturally tried to question Chris about the particulars of what was going on, but he'd cut us off with a curt, "I can't tell you."

It made sense in retrospect. He was probably being particularly cautious because he didn't know where information might leak from. Now that it had become apparent something was amiss among the royal family's Shadows, I could perfectly understand his hesitation to share. I also felt that he did communicate to us everything he felt he could. Anything that had been left unspoken was a sign of his faith in us, that he trusted us to be smart enough to figure it out on our own.

I could never have predicted that what lay in wait for us was a resurgence of the Ashen Nightmare. Chris, on the other hand, knew well beforehand about the storm that was coming, which was why he had painstakingly expended all his resources to search for a cure. What he had found instead was only a clue, but it was that which he'd entrusted to Lady Elianna. He did it all knowing full well that she might contract the disease herself in the process. Marquess Bernstein had praised Chris for making that call. Instead of locking her away in the safety of the royal palace and protecting her from any possible

threats, he had prioritized his role as crown prince and sent her away, for the sake of the realm and its future.

I shuddered at the actions of the family known as Sauslind's Brain. Perhaps it was silly to be aghast at this point, having known them for as many years as I had, but it was chilling how willing they were to send their own into harm's way with no compunction so long as they deemed it the best course. Their ability to make tough calls was commendable if not callous.

Though I knew it was foolish to entertain theoretical possibilities, I mused to myself that if Chris were the type of man to lock Lady Elianna away, the marquess and his family likely would have stopped at nothing to annul their engagement. Then, I suspected, they would have retreated from the royal court and hidden away the same as they had before.

I quickly chased the thought from my mind. Lady Elianna was no longer here in the palace, and moreover, we had no idea if she was dead or alive. I could only imagine the self-loathing Chris felt. He had made Lady Elianna his fiancée because he wanted them to be together; he wanted a future with her. But far from achieving that, his love for her had instead placed her in mortal danger, and even assuming she did survive, her position as crown princess was still in peril.

Chris was probably caught in a cycle of self-blame and despair, wondering if things would have been better if he had never dared to hope for marriage with the woman he loved. It was precisely why Marquess Bernstein had scolded him for repeating the same contradictions ad nauseam.

I breathed a muted sigh as I watched my childhood friend walking calmly ahead of me. He hadn't given up yet. I was certain of that. If someone were to ask me how I was so confident, I could only reply, "Because I just know." It was vague, admittedly, but even if—

"Prince Christopher."

Only a privileged few were ever allowed entry into Chris's office, but it was from within that room that a cheerful voice called his name, welcoming him in. The door was propped open. Inside stood a noblewoman wearing a friendly, soothing smile. The very atmosphere around her was inexplicably warm and comforting, enveloping any who came close in the kindness that overflowed from her. Her compassion wasn't the sort other aristocrats put on display for appearances, but rather something more subdued that bespoke a genuine empathy for other people's pain.

Lady Pharmia Odin was the perfect match for Chris, pedigree and all. She acted the part of a long devoted chamberlain who supported the crown prince and maintained his office while he was away.

Likewise, when he returned, she would welcome him and find subtle ways to alleviate the accumulation of stress from his busy days overseeing all the duties that had been thrust upon him.

A normal man—no, more realistically, any man at all—in as distressful of a situation as Chris found himself in would be drawn to any supportive presence at his side. It was only natural. If Chris were to open his heart to her, I couldn't blame him. Yet, in spite of how sincere she tried to appear, something about the way she conducted herself left me with an undeniable sense of discomfort. Everything she did or said *seemed* genuine, yes, but there was something ever so slightly unnatural about it that suggested it was all engineered. It was as though she was trying to slowly but surely erase all traces of the prince's current fiancée.

Meanwhile, the moment Chris spotted her, he immediately stopped dishing out any orders relating to politics. He strode right past Lady Pharmia, treating her like air. If she brewed him a cup of tea and placed it on his desk, he wouldn't touch it. If she tried speaking to him, he would tune her out without offering so much as a glance. If I were in her place and someone I had feelings for gave me such cold treatment, I'd be devastated.

Lady Pharmia, however, was different.

"Here you are, Lord Glen." She offered me tea with a smile, giving no indication whatsoever that her feelings were hurt.

I refused her with the excuse that I was still on duty—something I'd taken to doing lately every time she poured me a cup.

Lady Pharmia pushed the matter no further and withdrew with the same smile plastered on her face as when she'd offered. She busied herself instead with tidying up the books and documents inside the office, casually changing out the ink bottle on Chris's desk, and attending to other small details.

I had known Lady Pharmia since we were children, but I'd never known her to possess such inner strength until now. That was what made me realize how strong women were. But how was it that her heart remained so undaunted? From where did she draw this strength? I glanced at Chris, who was seated at his desk and silently working through stacks of paperwork. He was the source, I suspected.

Only one person could normally come and go from the prince's office regardless of whether Chris was present or not, and that was Lady Elianna. Yet, as of right now, Lady Pharmia was being treated with even more deference than Lady Elianna had been. None of her personal maids dared enter the office with her, of course, but she need only take a single step outside for them to flock to her immediately. Her maids were incredibly attentive.

Her presence also served as a keen reminder that sometimes,

circumstances can make a man—or, in this case, a woman.

For all intents and purposes, Lady Pharmia Odin appeared to have the crown prince's favor. Many already believed that she was pregnant with his child as well. That was why Earl Tralles, who was aligned with Duke Odin's faction, had made the comments he did about Chris rethinking his course of action considering the offense it might cause the duke. Chris was doing what he could to gauge the strength of the other side's influence so he could handle them accordingly, but he constantly found himself on the back foot. At least, that was how it appeared to me.

The other side had the advantage, from their reputation at the national level, to the current state of affairs which tipped in their favor, as well as the tacit approval from the other aristocracy at court.

In the beginning, Chris had drawn a clear line by telling Lady Pharmia to cease entering his office. At this, she'd flashed a soft smile and asked, "But why?" She had then continued, "Lady Elianna has been allowed unrestricted access to your office, has she not?"

Chris had furrowed his brow at that remark, which in turn had prompted cold beads of sweat to trickle down my forehead. He wasn't the only one incensed; I got the impression that Lady Pharmia was indignant as well. However, whatever the two were feeling, Chris had begun to ignore her presence entirely after that. Lady Pharmia, in turn, pretended to be unaffected. Seeing the two like this was heartbreaking.

There was a time when we were younger that we were so innocent we gave no heed to our individual stations and played together like normal children. We got in the same mischief that all people at such a tender age do, had our own shared secrets, and pitched in to support one another whenever someone was in trouble. We didn't care about etiquette or proper manners. We just played until dusk and watched together as the sun set.

"Your Highness," said Lady Pharmia. "Prince Christopher." The young noblewoman who had completely usurped the position of chamberlain, which in turn meant she oversaw the reception of guests in the prince's office, gave Chris the sweetest smile I'd ever seen on her face.

"The military, which is still holding the prince of Maldura captive, as I am sure you know, has been pressing us to make a decision. They advise that returning the man to his country would be the best course of action... Although, whether he goes back in one piece may be up for debate."

A shiver ran through everyone in the room—every member of the imperial guard attending to Chris. Lady Pharmia had only spoken of "the military," rather than any specific individuals, and it gave the

illusion of a faceless mass of voices, all of whom were pressing for Sauslind to make an official declaration of war.

Although Chris had kept his gaze focused on the paperwork before him, even he had to pause to glance up after that chilling declaration. The fires of resentment raged within his blue eyes. Lady Pharmia, on the other hand, kept the same gentle smile plastered on her lips.



“If you would like, my father and I would be able to suppress the more extreme voices—those of the pro-war faction.”

The duke did indeed have that power. Furthermore, support for Lady Pharmia was mounting from all directions—from within the court, the capital, and from around the country. All that was left was for the crown prince to bestow her with an official title. He need only give her the position of crown princess.

Though Lady Pharmia hadn’t said as much explicitly, the insinuation was there; Duke Odin’s house would step in to grant Chris’s wish and prevent a war from breaking out, but only if Chris would meet their demands.

Chapter 4: The Light That Shines at Night

What can I do? What should I do?

It was dark inside the house, the only source of light a nearby candle and the flame heating a small stove, which I'd been staring at for a while now. I lived in the mountainous regions of the north, where the winters were harsh and unforgiving. In the typical commoner's household, the fire was never completely extinguished during the cold months; embers had to be kept going so that when one awoke first thing in the morning, they could make a proper fire.

It went without saying that anyone from these parts was taught from a young age how to keep the coals lit without causing a fire in the process. Yes, when I was younger, the person who taught me was

“Martha?”

I jumped in surprise, my reverie cut short by a soft voice from one of the back rooms of the house. The owner of the voice had so little energy left that he could barely even speak. As I scrambled to his side to take care of him, he shot me an apologetic look.

The reason my whole body seemed to tremble constantly wasn't due to the chilling cold. An old fear was snaking through my gut, one that I'd tasted long ago when I was a child.

I flexed my chapped hands repeatedly as my mind flashed back to the past.

I was young at the time, only ten years old. An epidemic was spreading in our town, and my parents and older brother suddenly fell ill. I had no idea what was happening. Our neighbors had always been so friendly and welcoming, but the moment they knew my family was infected, they turned their backs on us. Any relatives we turned to for help spurned us, claiming, “That's not our problem.” They cut ties with us, insisting we were no longer family. I tried my best to look after my parents and brother, but since I was only ten, I soon hit my limits.

Although our neighbors and the townspeople had ostracized us, the rumors did eventually begin to reach me. This new sickness, people said, was called the Ashen Nightmare. Like all other diseases, it was passed from one infected person to another. There was no cure. What made it so terrifying was that catching it was essentially a death

knell; all one could do was wait for the end.

I became numb, overcome with despair and the powerlessness of my own limits. It was the family of one of my dad's mining buddies that swooped in to help. Generous though they were, even they felt trepidation in the face of the disease that had infected my parents, but it didn't stop them from reaching out a helping hand.

Unfortunately, my parents and older brother couldn't be saved. I was left an orphan. My future husband's parents were kind enough to take me under their wing and look out for me after that. I did lose my entire family, yes, but I counted myself among the lucky. Many others at the time were completely abandoned when they sought help and wound up dying without anyone doing a thing for them.

I could at least say that I had looked after my family and done everything I could for them before they passed. It broke my heart to see them cremated instead of given the proper burial legislated by the government, but I promised myself I would carry on their will.

"Martha, please...we at least want you to survive..."

I now knew firsthand exactly how they had felt. When my beloved fell ill, I stayed by his side and entrusted our two young children to his parents. I figured they'd at least be safer there than they would be here.

He coughed, and it felt like my heart was being crushed inside my chest. I balled my hands. As long as he was coughing, that meant he still had life left in him. He could still drink water and soups at least. He could even communicate what he wanted to me. The scary part would come...when the spots on his body began to spread. When the coughing stopped. When...he fully lost consciousness and spent the last of his days sleeping. Once he entered that stage, it would be too late to do anything.

"Ngh." A strangle cry escaped my throat, an unspoken question—*Why?* I'd already experienced unspeakable devastation when I was a child, tasted the bitterness and sadness of terrible loss, which I had hoped never to repeat. So why? Why was I being forced to go through this again?

The nightmare had returned.

"What should I do...?"

I had noticed only a few days ago that he was feeling ill. I'd heard whispers in town that a cold was going around this year. I never dreamed that the same phantom of death that had haunted us sixteen years ago would come back like this!

I immediately concealed the truth of his illness once I realized. As soon as a single person in the family came down with any illness in Hersche, they were sent off to the town at the foot of Mt. Urma, along with the rest of their family members, whether they were healthy or

not. There was no room for argument. It didn't matter that the place they were being sent to was one full of death.

Something similar had happened sixteen years ago. The country didn't begin taking measures against the plague until it had already spread, and when they finally did act, their choice was to uproot entire families and send them to secluded areas for quarantine. The healthy were forced into close quarters with the infected like that until they finally came up with a diagnostic medicine for identifying the Ashen Nightmare.

That was why I'd sent our children to stay at my in-laws' house. Although, since then, there had been an uprising in Mt. Urma's mining town, leaving me unable to contact my father-in-law. The only thing I could do now was hide my husband's illness. Since word had started getting out about the Ashen Nightmare's return, our neighbors had refrained from leaving their homes any more than necessary. This had worked to my benefit; I was sure none of them had realized that my husband was infected.

Sixteen years later and I could still remember it vividly—the way our fellow townspeople had abandoned us, how they'd shunned us as if we were some sort of abomination. Even after I managed to survive in the wake of my family's death, cruel words were thrown my way. "She's the daughter of the diseased," they would say. "Don't get too close or she'll infect you."

I wasn't going to let my children go through the same thing I had gone through.

As much as I wanted to summon a doctor to have a look at my husband, all the doctors had been called to the mining village at the foot of Mt. Urma. There was no one I could turn to.

I was on the brink of tears, my thoughts swallowed by despair, when suddenly, I recalled something I'd heard when I ventured out to the well before to retrieve some water. Word was that an unusual singer was at Berndt's place—unusual insofar as their abilities were so awe-inspiring that they were a better fit for the royal opera theater than somewhere as remote as our town. What was most peculiar about this individual, however, was that I'd heard he and his companions had stepped in to help a sickly child.

Perhaps they know of some way to deal with the Ashen Nightmare...

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I, Elianna Bernstein, found myself in deep distress as I sat before a small, boiling pot, merely watching the fire crackle and pop. For a while now, my every attempt to do anything had earned me a scolding.

"Don't you dare move an inch, ya hear? Keep your mouth shut

and just watch. Make sure to report to me about any changes in the color or scent of the herbs that're boilin'!"

Dr. Hester's young apprentice, who also happened to have inherited Furya's Jar, not only had a sharp eye but a sharp tongue; her scathing rebukes were so intimidating that I had no choice but to follow her orders.

I couldn't understand why she wouldn't let me help. The herbs in the pot were supposed to be packed with nutrients, so it only stood to reason that adding *more* would increase their potency. Convinced as much, I tried once more to add just a sprinkle...

"Hey! What're you trying to put in there? You dim-witted fool! I told you, for the first batch we're just boiling it down to make it more concentrated! As for the second...you'd better not doze off! If you don't keep that heat at a constant temperature, I'll dice you up and use you for firewood!"

For the third batch, we would wait for the sandglass to run down before adding further reagents to the mixture. For the fourth, we would take the stove off the fire and let it cool—and so on and so forth.

Lady Gene reminded me of a demigod with three heads and six arms I'd read about in some foreign literature. We were conducting our experiments in a room with the boiling pots divided into areas. In one area, we were using the same ingredients and adjusting the temperature of each pot; in another, we were keeping the temperature the same and changing the reagents inside. Lady Gene kept a watchful eye on all of them even as she dished out detailed instructions on how to grind down the Milulu Clams.

Beads of sweat trickled down my back as I sat in front of the first batch, my eyes glued to the pot and the flames beneath it. I knew I couldn't defy her. If I dared to try anything else, I'd no doubt find my arms bound and my mouth gagged, with only my vision left unobstructed. Even for as obstinate as I could be sometimes, the atmosphere in here was too oppressive for me to test the waters again.

A loud yawn echoed from the person beside me, their eyelids heavy with sleep as they fought to keep them open. Through the cloth I was holding over my mouth and nose, to keep from inhaling any of the fumes from our experiments, I asked, "Are you all right?"

To explain how we arrived at this current moment in time, we must first return to the past—to the events from last night.

Everyone held their breath as the sound of approaching footsteps stopped abruptly in front of our door. Prince Irvin was poised to draw his sword at a moment's notice, while Lord Alan sank down to his haunches, careful not to make a sound. Mabel positioned herself in

front of me the moment she noticed the other two raise their guards. She stood firm, as if resolved to shield me no matter what intruder breached the room. The nervous tension in the air was suffocating. The seconds felt like minutes, at least until a voice from inside the room broke the silence.

“Oh,” Lady Gene gasped.

Not a moment later, a subdued knock came at the door. Lady Gene immediately scurried over to the entrance. She paused to look over her shoulder, her expression relaxed as she said, “It’s all right.” Her hand turned the knob before any of us could stop her.

Prince Irvin took a step forward, his tone breezy as he blurted, “So it was you, huh?”

The rest of us blinked in surprise at who we saw on the other side of the door; it was the guide the innkeeper had introduced us to before, who had shown us the way to Dr. Hester’s residence—a taciturn man who appeared to be in his midforties. He and Lady Gene were well acquainted and, since they were both so reticent, they seemed to recognize each other by their presence alone.

As the rest of us breathed a collective sigh of relief, the man handed Lady Gene a set of medicinal herbs. Where he’d gotten them was anyone’s guess.

Lady Gene wasted no time enlisting him for further help with ingredients. “I want Milulu Clams,” she said. The rest of us felt a little uneasy as she gave him an overview of the situation and then a list of additional herbs she required, but despite our misgivings, the man gave a curt nod and immediately left.

Before I knew what I was doing, I blurted after him, “Please wait.”

Driven on impulse, I hurried over to the man, pulled the warm blanket from my shoulders, and held it out toward him. The room we were in was fairly small, so even without a fire to provide warmth during the night, the body heat of all of us crammed inside kept the temperature bearable. The same could not be said for this man, however, who had only just come in from outside. On my approach, I caught the scent of snow and felt the outside chill that still lingered on him.

“Why not get some rest tonight?” I suggested.

The man’s face remained unreadable, but his lips twitched into an almost imperceptible smile. “I’ll bring you the ingredients you need. Please be sure to rest so you’ll be ready when I return.”

I gawked at him, not expecting that he would deflect my words right back at me.

Lady Gene dug through her clothes and produced a small bundle that she then held out to him. The scene was all too familiar to me, causing my heart to ache. The man, who was at least three times older

than Lady Gene, said nothing even as the edges of his mouth went taut. He was frowning.

“Oh, c’mon,” Lady Gene grumbled at him. “You sure do hate the type of thermal medicine we use ’round these parts, but you’d better take this with you. Don’t need you turning into an ice statue while you’re out there. I wouldn’t sleep well if that happened.”

I think his life, and in turn survival, is more pressing than whether or not he turns into an ice statue, I thought to myself.

Our former guide expelled an exaggerated sigh. He took the bundle she offered and silently tipped his head in gratitude. Then he turned and stepped back into the darkened corridor.

“Um,” I called after him again, still not entirely comfortable with him setting out into the cold at this time of night.

His eyes darted toward me, and he paused long enough to say, “I will be back tomorrow. Please rest until then. You are the key to resolving this entire situation, Bibliophile Princess.”

I sucked in a breath. His response was like the prick of a needle, jolting me to my senses. This man knew me, not as Elianna, the crown prince’s bride-to-be, but likely from my younger days, when I would hole up in our regional library—the days when my only title was bibliophile.

“You’re...” I started to say, but before I could finish, the man in the heavy woolen overcoat hurried down the hallway. Before he disappeared completely, Lady Gene bid him to stay safe, and so he went, carrying the young herbalist’s hopes with him.

Any further discussion that night would have gotten us nowhere, so we decided to call it and get some rest. Having already hashed out all sorts of ideas as to what trial cures we might concoct, both Lady Gene and myself were incredibly anxious to get to work. I heeded their advice, though my mind was still abuzz with excitement about our progress.

We all agreed it would be best to sleep in one place together, so we gathered in Dr. Hester’s room. Lady Gene and I shared a bed, while Mabel created a cloth pallet nearby for herself. Prince Irvin, Rei, and Lord Alan took turns keeping watch outside the door for the rest of the night.

Frankly, I was worried that I wouldn’t be able to sleep with how my mind was running, but contrary to expectations, my physical exhaustion outweighed my elation, and not long after my head hit the pillow, I fell fast asleep.

The following morning, under Captain Gene’s orders, we began a second reformation of the inn. The innkeeper was understandably flabbergasted, mumbling, “But why...?” Although I did feel sorry for the poor man, we hadn’t a moment to spare.

Although the Azul Region neighbored Ralshen, and the highway between them was well maintained to keep up with the frequent foot traffic back and forth, Corba Village was nestled in the mountains. Our former guide who'd left to fulfill Lady Gene's request wouldn't return with the Milulu Clams until tomorrow or the day after, no matter how much he rushed. That would be too late to begin compounding our trial cures. This was the first time Lady Gene would ever be working with the Milulu Clam, after all, and she needed time to assess them. Those clams could turn out to be our trump card—the key ingredient we needed to develop a cure.

Lady Gene wanted to analyze all of the clam's properties, from quality to possible variations and effectiveness. Only then could she truly begin putting a sample together for us to test. It was only natural she would exercise such caution; people's lives were hanging in the balance. Alas, we hadn't much time, and if that wasn't bad enough, we lacked the necessary space, tools, and personnel to create different mixtures for testing.

We negotiated with the innkeeper and managed to secure a place and personnel at least, at which point Lady Gene declared, "What we require right now is time."

"What?" I gasped, blinking at her.

Contrary to disbelief, Lady Gene's eyes were filled with determination. "I want more personnel and space to work in, of course, but the biggest question of all is how much of this we can mass-produce. I want to make two types of medicine."

Lady Gene's words were as resolute as the expression on her face. Fires of ambition raged in her eyes, indicating that perhaps she hadn't slept a wink, instead ironing out her plans until the early morning hours. Even the innkeeper was taken aback despite how long he'd been acquainted with her. I could only guess this was the first time he'd ever seen her act so intimidating.

I, on the other hand, sucked in a breath as I mulled over her what she'd said. When obtaining an ingredient and working with it for the first time, one typically checked its composition and tested its efficacy first. Lady Gene's plans had already shot right past that step; she was moving straight to using the clams to concoct a cure. More astounding still was that she wanted to make two types. Lady Gene had already determined what ingredients she was going to use, so instead of using extra time testing, she wanted to rush to the next step.

"What can I do to help?" I asked.

My question launched us into a discussion in which we settled on a plan. For the moment, I needed to secure additional manpower and all the ingredients necessary to produce a cure.

It was at this point that we carefully divulged the details of the

situation to the innkeeper, and from then on, the dining hall became our work area. All guests were then prohibited from entering the room, and everything in it was removed. We used alcohol as a disinfectant to scrub the entire place from top to bottom, leaving not a nook or cranny—or even the ceiling, for that matter—untouched.

Then, while we were waiting, we split up and contacted other nearby chefs to enlist their aid, requisitioning whatever cooking utensils they could provide. We weren't yet at the point where we needed specialized tools to boil down herbs, so cooking equipment would serve just fine as a substitute. We boiled all the utensils repeatedly until Lady Gene deemed them sufficiently disinfected.

It was as the early winter sun was setting that an express courier arrived with a package. A smaller letter attached to it read:

To Lady Gene,

Here are the ingredients you requested for use in concocting a cure. I have included a number of other herbs as well.

"This can't possibly be from..." Prince Irvin gasped in disbelief. He'd been tasked with guard duty from noon until evening. Though his shock mirrored my own—how could our former guide possibly deliver the reagents this fast?—Lady Gene didn't even blink twice. Instead, she immediately launched into handing out orders as if she'd expected this to happen.

"We will immediately begin formulating a cure for the Ashen Nightmare. From this moment on, no one is allowed to enter this inn unless they are under my supervision or have my express permission!"

With all the fuss about deep cleaning the dining hall and its vicinity from top to bottom, the inn had drawn the attention of the rest of the town this morning. In spite of her young age, Lady Gene wielded an air of intense authority, overpowering all of the townspeople in her quest to prepare. One person, however, had some slight qualms about the outcome of this situation...

"I-I'm supposed to be the proprietor... All I ever wanted was a stable, quality inn by the roadside to service the miners coming through—just a normal, quaint establishment... That's all I ever wanted..."

It was startling to see the tragic mess to which the owner had been reduced. It was said a man's home was his castle, and for the innkeeper, who'd dedicated his life to this place, seeing it transform before his eyes without any opportunity to protest left him dejected. We pulled him aside to discuss his grievances and the impact this was having on his business and promised to compensate him.

That brings us back to the present.

Prince Irvin's exhaustion was understandable in light of the long

hours he'd been pulling. He forsook manners as he yawned loudly behind the cloth he kept pressed over his face. "We made a smart move," he mumbled. "Announcing in front of the townspeople that Gene's gonna be making a cure for the Ashen Nightmare here, I mean. The group that's out for your life is going to be hesitant to attack now."

True, I thought.

Due to the inn's reformations this morning and Lady Gene's declaration to the townspeople, we had drawn substantial attention to ourselves. The dining hall was no longer being used for its original purpose now that we had transformed it into a workshop. Personnel and supplies would be coming in and out of the inn doors all hours of the day—and night, for that matter. A number of curious onlookers had been trying to peek inside too. Even if anyone did manage to sneak into our midst and make an attempt on my life—the same way Jean had when he'd burned down Dr. Hester's house—someone would spot them in the act.

The Ashen Nightmare was a fearsome plague, one that everyone abhorred. Launching an attack on someone involved with making a cure, no matter the justification, would be tantamount to a historical crime of epic proportions in the eyes of the populace.

I could feel everyone's attention on Lady Gene and me; Prince Irvin, Rei, Lord Alan, and even Mabel were following us with their eyes. While I was glad for their expectations, they also served as a weight, anchoring me down. To reach the next step of this process, we had to make our move, but we had no way of searching for clues as to how to do that. So what were we supposed to do?

"Sample three! We're grinding the shells down differently. You're not sawing meat off a bone, so keep that in mind. And you'd better not be half-hearted about it either. You gotta really bring out the flavor of the ingredient you're working with. The smoothness and texture change depending on how you grind down the shell."

The way Lady Gene barked out detailed instructions might make one think she was either the Goddess of Milulu Clams or a renowned chef. She was pouring her heart and soul into making this medicine, so I had to somehow get word out to the rest of the world as to its effectiveness. An impromptu announcement with no forethought wouldn't do the trick. No, we needed something else...

I continued contemplating the matter as I set to work on the next sample. In the meantime, the winter sun continued to sink below the horizon, but the tense atmosphere in the room didn't lift even as darkness set in. It continued until midnight the following day. One by one, our comrades fell. Lady Gene's draconian supervision could only be likened to what one might expect from the keeper of the

underworld. By the end, only two survivors remained: two pots and a light source.

Just as Lady Gene had declared, she had two final concoctions simmering.

Considering how the room was littered with limp bodies passed out from exhaustion, it certainly did look like the underworld here. The untrained eye could be forgiven for mistaking us all for corpses. In fact, if someone completely ignorant of the situation were to stumble in here now, it would be little wonder if they suspected us of vile sorcery—of trying to summon a demon king from the depths of the netherworld.

“Is it over...?” Prince Irvin asked, looking like death warmed over.

Equally exhausted and grumbling like a petulant child, Lord Alan shot back, “It sure better be. If it’s not, I’m going to kick the bucket. I mean it. I’m spent.”

“If it isn’t, I suppose that means we will be starting over from square one, eh?” Rei added. “He he. So this ordeal may turn out to be more grueling than even the evil sorceress’s training was. Very well. I’ll happily take on the challenge.” In the process of all this, Rei seemed to have awakened to a strange predilection.

Perhaps it was due to the harsh shadows the light in the room cast on their faces, or perhaps it was because the exhaustion had left them all with dark circles beneath their eyes, but my companions looked most suspicious indeed. I could well imagine it wasn’t only the boys; Mabel, Lady Gene, the innkeeper, and myself probably looked equally as ghastly. My head spun from lack of sleep and exhaustion. It was likely everyone else was experiencing the same.

No matter how exhausted we all were, our attention remained on the only woman still standing. Our commanding officer, Captain Gene, would be the one to make the final call on whether we’d succeeded.

“There was a lot more trial and error than I’d anticipated,” Lady Gene muttered to herself. Traces of fatigue lined her face, yes, but more pronounced was her excitement. The words she spoke next were the greatest reward we could hope for after all of our hard work and painstaking effort. Her voice was full of energy, confidence, and strength. “It came out the way I envisioned. As I am now, I can make nothing greater to top this. This is our first big step in creating a cure for the Ashen Nightmare.”

A cheer rang out. Exhaustion wasn’t all that filled us now; we felt a deep sense of accomplishment, as well as relief and hope. A deathly plague without a cure had begun terrifying our country once again, but now, we had a ray of light we might offer to the victims teetering on the brink of death and their families.

“What do you mean by ‘first step’?” Rei asked, wanting

clarification.

Before Lady Gene could provide it, a brave voice cut in, “All right! We need to get this to the people at the foot of Mt. Urma as quickly as possible.”

It was the innkeeper who made this declaration—the man who, throughout this entire process, had maintained an unbelievable level of energy as he roused those of us who dared fall asleep, even if it was in the middle of the night. This little waypoint town where he had his establishment was only in business courtesy of the local mines. He was well acquainted with the townspeople in the area too, so the uprising wasn’t inconsequential to him. It was no wonder he was worried for the people there and what they were going through.

The bigger motivation, I suspected, was that aside from being good natured to begin with, he probably wanted to contribute to the cause in his own way. He’d likely never forgotten the child he’d lost to the Ashen Nightmare and didn’t want anyone else to go through that if he could help it. It was true that he had been reluctant to indulge our requests in the beginning, but he’d ultimately acquiesced and cooperated. This too I thought was motivated by his drive to contribute.

Despite his eagerness to see the medicine delivered, our commanding officer, Captain Gene, put a stop to it.

“Hold on,” she said. “Don’t put the cart ahead of the horse. I’ve got no intention of sending this medicine to the village at the foot of Mt. Urma just yet.”

“What?” gasped the proprietor in disbelief. The expression on his face suddenly shifted. As far as he was concerned, Lady Gene’s words contradicted our entire purpose for doing this. “Why?!”

Lady Gene shook her head and assuaged his fears by reminding him, “I said not yet.”

While he and the others in the room struggled to fathom the reasoning for this decision, I nodded in agreement.

“We have made a request of the locals,” I clarified. “We explained everything to the family members of the infected and have received their agreement to test the medicine here first.”

“What?!” The innkeeper gaped at me.

I explained to him that, actually, several of the residents living in town had consulted Mabel in secret; men had even sent their wives to contact her. At first, they wanted to know how to prevent the Ashen Nightmare and any other relevant information, but soon, Mabel noticed the women acting suspiciously. Their complexions were unusually pale, and they seemed to be hiding something. Their desperation as they petitioned her for aid also indicated to Mabel that perhaps...

“You’re saying there are people infected with the Ashen Nightmare here in this town? And these women were hiding them...?”

It hadn’t been altogether surprising to me; I had suspected this might happen. Even though the government had issued an official proclamation in an attempt to get the prescription—or rather recipe—for the medicine that suppresses the disease’s symptoms out to the public, Lady Gene had clearly never seen it before we handed it to her directly. It stood to reason that other people wouldn’t know of its existence either, in which case, wouldn’t they resort to hiding their loved ones from the rest of the town?

Many people in this region had become infected with the plague, and they’d been sent to quarantine at the foot of Mt. Urma. People began to view being sent there as a death sentence.

“Sir,” I said, “you hold great influence in this town. I understand you cannot overlook those who become infected or those who flout the law. If you turn a blind eye even once, it could expose every soul in town to danger. Please do not misunderstand me; I do not believe the infected should be ignored either. Nonetheless...”

What had prompted people to hide their afflicted loved ones? Given my position as the prince’s betrothed, I felt that question deserved consideration.

“If one person becomes infected, people begin to suspect that person’s entire family of carrying the disease. It is true that the infection rate is high among family members, but it is also true that some do not contract it at all. Take you and your wife for example. But would I be correct in assuming that you have still faced some prejudice in spite of that?”

He was silent.

Sixteen years ago, the plague had spread without discrimination. Civilians were infected, of course, but so were brawny military men, aristocrats of all ranks, and even the queen. But did people ostracize the king and prince for their relation to the ill queen? No. Queen Henrietta was quarantined elsewhere, and people treated His Majesty and His Highness as if they had nothing to do with her condition.

Some might think it only natural for their case to be unique compared to the rest of Sauslind’s citizenry; after all, in the past, members of the royal family were revered as living gods. I was perfectly aware of that, but I would also argue that every person at the time had suffered the same regardless of their status.

The stigma against disease continued to haunt the people of the realm. Was that not also another form of sickness plaguing Sauslind?

“There is a way to cure disease—to best it. However, it’s not the patient’s job alone to do all the heavy lifting. They require the aid of the people around them. There will always be those who shrink away

in fear, I know. But this illness, like any other, is something that can be conquered. Being infected is not something that should be hidden away and kept secret. Instead, we should be openly proud of the fact that there is a way to beat it!”

Indeed. We, the people, shouldn’t be spreading gross rumors about this disease or any other. I wasn’t suggesting we should underestimate the danger or lethality of what we were up against—it was healthy to fear it and wise to be cautious—but we couldn’t lose our will to be victorious in the process. There were people who had overcome the Ashen Nightmare; the queen herself was able to best it. We also had medicine that could suppress the symptoms. If these facts had been more widely disseminated, the people would not feel pressured to hide their infected loved ones.

“Our government is to blame for not providing such information to all the peoples in its territories,” I continued. “It is pointless to blame the families of the ill.”

When we’d first embarked on our reformation of the inn and its facilities, I had revealed my identity to the proprietor. My words seemed to jog his memory—to remind him of my status—and he grimaced, hesitant to believe me. Distrust toward the royal family remained deeply rooted in the hearts of Ralshen’s people. To his eyes, I probably looked like an unreliable noble girl. It was only right that he should question whether he could entrust me to handle something as urgent as this. His expression gave away how conflicted he was.

Regardless of his feelings on the matter, I was resolved. I had at last found a sliver of hope that might break us out of the hopeless deadlock we had been in. This was no time to be shrinking back.

“We gave a thorough explanation about the cure Lady Gene has concocted to those who came to enlist our help. We also told them that this would be a trial run, that we were still in the testing stages and could give no guarantee as to the efficacy of the treatment. There could also be side effects. Still, they said they wanted to do it.”

I’d personally met with the people who came to consult Mabel, and I’d heard their stories myself. For them, it was a grave secret they could share with no one else. They knew not where to go otherwise to petition aid. If there was any possibility of saving their loved ones, they wanted to cling to it.

“First, we will prescribe the medicine to the infected in this town. We will see what progress they make and refine the recipe, then we can launch into step two of the process. We wait until then. Once it’s ready, I will head to the village near Mt. Urma. I will put an end to the uprising.”

During the process of creating the medicine, I’d conferred with Lady Gene as to whether or not we should head straight to the village

at the foot of Mt. Urma and request the infected there to participate in a clinical trial. The issue with going that route was that Lady Gene wasn't acquainted with anyone from there, nor was she someone of particular renown to begin with. People would see her as nothing more than an eccentric child spouting nonsense and give her the cold shoulder.

What if I, the crown prince's betrothed, went there instead? Well, that wouldn't do us much good either if they shooed me out as I suspected they would. They too held a deep distrust toward the royal family, which had only swelled to the point that they'd finally revolted.

That said, we couldn't possibly ask the proprietor of the inn or any other influential townspeople to do it in our stead. That would potentially put their lives at risk, and I couldn't bear to push off this responsibility on someone else.

"If we don't have proof of our word, the rioters will turn us away at the door. Requests for them to participate in a clinical trial would only incite further backlash. It would sound as if we were making them act as guinea pigs—as if their lives didn't matter. This is the quickest way to end the revolt and save the infected living there. Please, won't you cooperate with us a little longer, sir?"

I was determined not to abandon anyone.

"Yep," Lady Gene agreed. "Without clinical trials, we can't really claim it's a cure. As an herbalist, I can't in good conscience offer this medicine to the sick near Mt. Urma."

Her reply was the deciding factor that tipped the scales. The proprietor gave a resigned, if not bitter smile as he assented. "I've been helping you out this long. Pitching in a bit more shouldn't make that much of a difference, I'm sure."

At last we could prescribe our newly created medicine to the infected in town who were being hidden away by their family members, allowing us to monitor the effectiveness of our cure.

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A voice rang through the air—a woman's fearful, high-pitched scream.

For the past few days in the Ralshen Region, particularly around the waypoint town of Hersche, snow had been falling on and off. Blizzards blew in from out of nowhere, blocking the roads and leaving the citizenry to frantically shovel the main highway to at least keep it traversable. Outside in the bitter cold, the scene of people hurriedly milling about was no different today than any other.

However, there was one stark difference in Hersche; steam was billowing continuously from many of the buildings throughout the

town, which included Berndt's inn as well the other surrounding inns, the eateries, the general store, and a number of civilian houses. So much vapor was in the air, in fact, that it dyed the winter sky a different shade.

It was in one of the many houses participating in this ritual that I, Elianna, found myself confronted by a panicking woman. She reacted to me with the same terror one might expect of someone caught in a showdown with an assassin.

"Y-You..." She thrust a finger toward me and the object I was grappling with.

To explain, I was currently in the scullery, where I had volunteered to help out. Although, it might be more accurate to say I'd been relegated to this type of labor because I lacked the experience and knowledge to oversee patients and confirm their symptoms but nevertheless wanted some way to contribute. I had been ordered to open the barrels where food had been stored to be preserved for the winter. I had obediently done as commanded, but I'd found myself in a desperate struggle trying to pry the lid off one of the barrels.

It was only when I heard that shrill scream that I paused to glance up at the scolding woman hovering over me. The moment I relaxed my grip, there was a soft pop as the lid suddenly flew off of the barrel. Only a second passed before the other women in the scullery began screaming at the top of their lungs in sheer terror, their cries deafeningly shrill.

Everyone else quickly fled the area. I knew in my head that I should follow their example and scramble out of here, but it was the first time I'd ever been assaulted by the stench of this stale preserved food unique to the northern regions. Although the other women probably found the odor unbearable, I was struck by a very different thought. *Ah, so this is the local specialty featured in Ralshen's history books, the same one Dan Edold wrote about in his travel diary.*

While I was distracted, the woman who'd been with me shooed me out with all the patience of someone chasing a stray cat from the kitchen, which is to say none at all.

I collapsed on the snow-peppered ground, the cold flakes still floating down all around me. The chilling cold was hardly on my mind, though. I was more focused trying to desperately gulp in fresh, clean air. That barrel of food could easily be the top listed item in a book titled *The Best Passive Aggressive Gifts for People You Don't Like*. The smell was so putrid that I could almost feel my head spinning.

"What's all the commotion?!" Prince Irvin demanded as he rushed over.

"Eli— I mean, El!" Mabel, who was supposed to be looking after the infected, had left her station to scurry over as well.

Prince Irvin was supposed to be acting as Lady Gene's bodyguard at the moment, so I felt terrible he'd abandoned his duty to come look after me. As I pulled myself back to my feet, I tried to say as much to him, but I didn't have the opportunity because both he and Mabel stopped short of reaching me. Although they all wore masks in the form of fabric secured over their mouths and noses, I could still make out their expressions. Their eyes and their very attitudes all seemed to convey the same message: "*You reek.*"

Silence stretched between us.

It would be embarrassing enough to receive such admonishing looks at my age as a commoner, but it was all the more shameful given I was both the crown prince's betrothed and the daughter of a marquess.

"El...what in the world have you done this time?" Mabel eyed me suspiciously, but worse was the sadness in her voice. I was even further disheartened that I couldn't refute the question and claim I'd done nothing at all.

I shrank under her gaze, like a child caught red-handed causing mischief. Rei, Prince Irvin's retainer, was kind enough to provide his master an explanation. I had mistakenly opened a container of fish preserved with salt which had been carried in from the Azul Region.

Prince Irvin dropped his head in a rare, emphatic show of emotion. "Don't tell me... It's the same infamous stuff we have back home?"

"Indeed. The nobility claim it's a gift. Preserved food they call it, though I can only assume it's an indirect form of harassment."

The way they spoke suggested that the same type of preserved food existed in regions of Maldura with similar climates to Ralshen. This immediately roused my curiosity, but before I inquired further, I needed to apologize to those I'd inconvenienced with my actions. I spun around to address them, but an exasperated voice cut me off.

"Hold it, hold it, hold it!" said one individual as they pushed their way through the bustling people on the streets. I knew it was our musician friend, Lord Alan, the moment I spotted his head of honey blond hair. He was supposed to be attending to a different job than the rest of us. "I'm over here working my tail off trying to produce this cloth El thought up that is supposed to keep the plague from spreading, and here you guys are playing around. What gives?"

Lord Alan's eyes landed on me, but he made it only a few steps in my direction before he froze. His expression didn't immediately give him away as the others had, but his voice hitched as he gasped, "What in the world..." He trailed off for only a moment before he asked, "Is this your new way of warding off unwanted suitors? Or potential attackers? It's definitely unconventional, I'll give you that."

His comments blindsided me. I hadn't given such an idea any thought, but now that he mentioned it, I paused to think. Was the stench really so foul that I could ward off attackers with it? Had my nose already grown so accustomed to the smell that I didn't even realize how potent it was anymore?

Whatever the case, Lord Alan quickly took charge of the situation. "We're so busy right now that there's not enough hands to cover everything, so this is no time to be fiddling with new experiments and the like, El. If you wanna develop perfume to repel burglars and drive off unscrupulous men, I'll be happy to assist as long as you save it for later."

That is most certainly not what I was attempting to do, mind you.

The women, who'd been inside with me earlier, stood nearby, noses pinched as they watched this all go down. Lord Alan promptly apologized to them. Prince Irvin and Mabel hurriedly returned to their stations. Feeling guilty for having disrupted everyone, I tried to return back to the scene of the crime so I could clean up the mess I'd created, but the other women ushered me off to the bath without affording me any opportunity to argue the point. To make matters worse, they all agreed I was unfit to work in the scullery. This time I felt less like a feline who had been chased away and more like a slug peppered in salt.

At any rate, I cleaned myself up, got dressed, and popped outside where Rei was waiting for me. The townspeople had refused to give him any laborious work because he looked too feminine and delicate to handle it, so instead he had been ordered to serve as my bodyguard. I felt terribly guilty he had to shoulder such a duty when he was supposed to be Prince Irvin's retainer.

I stopped to take a brief rest on the side of the road, and as I did so, the normally reticent Rei made a rare comment.

"I see that in Sauslind, the people use the steam from steam baths in a variety of ways."

He was right about that. In the Ralshen Region, steam from the baths could be used for a variety of other novel, daily functions. Inns had vents from the baths to the upper floors in order to help heat the rooms there. Wealthy households would have systems to funnel steam into the kitchen to use as a heat source for cooking.

Today, any household or building with the facilities in place to create steam were doing so. The innkeeper had courteously persuaded the other people in town for me. We were enlisting everyone with access to a heat source to assist in the production of the cure and my dyes. Just as the heat stones used in the inn's steam baths required extra fees to use, it wasn't cheap to make this kind of request of the townspeople. Nevertheless, desperate times called for desperate

measures. I swore I would bear the financial costs of it all, which prompted the innkeeper and other influential figures in town to take the reins and see my will done.

The sight of steam rising into the snowy, overcast sky was heartwarming. For a brief moment, it made me forget that our country was in the middle of a national crisis.

“Does Maldura not also utilize heat from steam?” I blurted out, curious.

As far as I knew, the concept of steam baths was a cultural remnant of the old empire as well. Maldura had taken much of its own culture from the empire, so it only stood to reason they would have similar customs.

Rei hesitated to discuss his home country, but as he gazed at the city of Hersche, he finally answered, “We use the heat from steam to preserve and smoke food. Our buildings are quite old, though, making their vents and piping unsuitable for dispersing steam. The current king traveled to various countries in his youth, acquiring knowledge and skills that he put into practice in the royal castle, renovating the place. Historically, our kings have focused on enlarging the castle, but none before had ever demolished and rebuilt it. In present-day Maldura, our king is considered a revolutionary monarch, but...he has also faced much backlash for his endeavors.”

Maldura was well-known for being isolationist. Their exclusionary attitudes were likely a product of Ryzanity, which rejected polytheism. Despite the limitations facing him, Maldura’s king had done what he could to make their nation more prosperous. The first step in doing so was to change their national symbol, which was the royal castle. Through this, he hoped to inspire change in the minds of the people.

“However,” Rei went on, “while the nobles would offer their own daughters to His Majesty, they would not share what skills they possessed to the larger public. They hoard their wealth, leaving the common people destitute, freezing in the cold, and starving to death...”

Although Rei didn’t explicitly say as much, the implication in his explanation was that the usage of steam as heat was one such example of withheld technology. It reminded me of something I’d read about before in a history book. The book contained a record of an impoverished country in which a privileged few sat at the center of power. The royalty and the nobility used their resources lavishly, never suffering from the cold or going a day without eating. The people, on the other hand, were forced to huddle together to endure the cold, suffering through brutal hardship to make it through the winter. But even if they managed to live through that, they couldn’t

hold out much hope that they would be able to survive the next cold season the same way.

Prince Irvin had come all the way here to Sauslind to recover proof of the mastermind making his country suffer. This further indicated to me that, in Maldura, a privileged class more preoccupied with lining their own pockets than utilizing resources to support their own people held sway. Such corruption was by no means limited to Maldura either. In spite of a plague spreading through our lands, some in Sauslind were still more concerned with their own wealth and greed—people who wouldn't hesitate to erase a cure for that deadly disease, who were, sadly, at the heart of our realm's administration.

As Rei reflected on the lives of the common folk back home, I said to him, "Hersche and the Ralshen Region as a whole did not have such buildings in the past." When he peered over at me, I smiled at him and once again cast my gaze over the waypoint town. "Forty years ago, during the Continental Highway War, Ralshen suffered innumerable casualties. Many symbolic buildings as well as civilian houses were heavily damaged. It was Queen Amalia, wife of the previous king, who planned and subsequently promoted the idea that the region would recover faster if they rebuilt all the structures anew rather than repairing the old ones. Thus, Queen Amalia is still revered in Ralshen today as the wise queen who dedicated herself to the revival of their region."

The story didn't end there, unfortunately. The unfavorable treatment she'd received in her later years had only heightened the distrust Ralshen's people held toward the royal family. It had been particularly damning in the eyes of those who'd already felt as though Sauslind had abandoned them during the war.

That had been a historical turning point. Whenever I considered all that had led us to the present, I was reminded of that fact.

There was little else of note in Ralshen aside from its mines. It was only in recent years that the application of heat stones had begun to draw attention, and by no stretch of the imagination could Ralshen be called prosperous. Still, the technology used in the inns here was no less impressive than what was employed in aristocratic residences in the capital.

I would never condone warfare, of course, but it was undeniable that Ralshen only existed as it did today because of the great war. However, that also made me pause to consider...what would things have been like if that turning point had been different? What if Ralshen hadn't been involved with the war? What if many of its people hadn't lost their lives, and their buildings hadn't been destroyed? Perhaps then they wouldn't hate the royal family the way they did now. And just maybe, Queen Amalia and the former king

would not have suffered such a rift between them.

Still, no matter how much I entertained the idea and the possibilities, it was all hypothetical. We couldn't return to the past. We were all living in a present shaped by the past our predecessors had left for us.

History always consisted of two things: the best and the worst. It reminded me of something my grandfather said to me long ago. "What should those of us living in the present do right now? Given the circumstances we find ourselves in, what can we leave behind for future generations?" He had echoed the same sentiments depicted in *Ryza's Guide*, a book my father had given to me when I was little.

"Rei," I said, "let's do what we can."

In truth, there was a system of plumbing that could be used in outdated buildings. Such technology was utilized not here in Ralshen but in another region with historic buildings. In the past, a regional lord there had held an affinity for older architecture, and he had updated the facilities within it to match more modern standards. Maldura held plenty of resources, while Sauslind held knowledge and technology. The future promised to be a bright one.

As I reflected on these things, Rei's mysterious, silver-gray eyes stared at me intently, but before we could continue our conversation any further, we were interrupted.

"El, Rei! Could you come over and help me next?" echoed Lord Alan, sounding bright and bubbly as usual.

The truth of our situation was that we lacked the necessary bodyguards to keep me safe as well as the required manpower to see to the mountain of tasks at hand. Thus, our strategy was for me to keep moving, never staying in one place for too long. Lady Gene and Mabel were the only ones qualified to tend to the sick, so they couldn't be shuffled around. Since Prince Irvin proved a reliable guard, we had him keep close to them, whereas I remained largely unprotected and instead darted around the town to keep my enemies from being able to pin down my location.

I'd actually proposed this strategy myself. My assassins were likely growing impatient after failing multiple times to kill me. If Lady Gene and myself stayed in one place together, I had no doubt they'd come for both of us. It was of paramount importance that we keep Lady Gene safe, given how close she was to finalizing a cure for the Ashen Nightmare. To that end, I wanted her to be able to conduct her clinical trials free from danger or concern.

When I'd discussed this with everyone, Mabel had frowned as if she wanted to contest my decision, but my orders were final.

"Right now, we must all do that which we deem is best," I had said.

That was how I ended up with Rei by my side. Since our reunion,

he and I hadn't found any opportunity to speak privately at all, so I was glad for this brief conversation that had given me some insight into who he was and how things were in Maldura.

I hurried over to answer Lord Alan's call, all the while unaware of the mysterious, silver-gray eyes that had quietly begun to set their sights on me.

Chapter 5: A Shadow's Tenacity

The sun rose slowly in the northern territory.

It was still early morning, when the curtain of darkness lingered over the land. Two carriages had been prepared, and a man was trudging toward one of them. I called after him, but I realized how pointless it was to say anything the moment the words left my mouth.

After the news had arrived, we'd conducted a detailed meeting and made arrangements for this morning. The carriage he was headed for wasn't really a carriage at all, but rather a wagon with no soldiers to act as bodyguards. The other was a proper carriage and far more suited for the person we were riding off to secure, given that this one had proper soldiers to guard it.

That's right, I thought to myself. Each breath I took in this icy air came out in visible white puffs. I bit my lip.

It had all started with the first report seven days ago...

One of the Black Wing Knights returned, badly wounded, to give a report on the situation. A group had attacked the carriages that had left to quell the nearby uprising. Many were wounded in the skirmish. The whereabouts of the carriage that had been carrying the crown prince's fiancée was also unknown.

I, Alexei Strasser, had been sent to the Ralshen Region to serve as Lady Elianna's assistant, so as soon as I heard the news, I scrambled to round up some of the region's military to accompany me to the scene.

Discovering what had happened to General Bakula was shocking, but I hadn't the time to dwell. I focused my efforts on transporting the wounded to safety and searching the nearby surroundings. What I eventually found was an area of severely trampled snow stained with blood and, finally, an empty carriage.

"Lady Elianna..."

A shiver ran down my spine—one not caused by the frigid outside temperatures.

In an instant, my mind was assailed by a flurry of anxious thoughts. If something were to happen to her, what would become of this country? His Highness was... And then there was the war brewing with Maldura... His Majesty and my own mother had both collapsed from illness... What of the clue that was supposed to lead us to a cure for the Ashen Nightmare?

I shook my head, driving away those concerns, and spent the rest of the day searching that area. When I came up empty handed, I resigned myself and sent an emergency missive to His Highness in the capital. I left the continuing search efforts to my subordinates, and those who had accompanied me to the scene, and returned to the earl's residence so that I could devise some sort of strategy to deal with this matter.

No sooner did I return than a certain someone confronted me.

"Where is Miss Eli?! What happened to her?!" Lady Lilia demanded urgently, with little regard for my superior status. An understandable reaction, given she was Lady Elianna's cousin. She was currently working at the royal palace as a maid and had accompanied Lady Elianna in that capacity, so I couldn't treat her as an ordinary noble lady in these circumstances. Besides, the two of us had never really shared a proper conversation to begin with. Even if she weren't related to the missing Lady Elianna, the situation was dire enough that I could understand her losing all sense of etiquette and propriety. It was obvious that she was anxious, worried, and infuriated.

I told her to calm herself and take a deep breath. As she did so, I surveyed the faces of everyone gathered. The ones who had rushed to the front entrance upon my return included the current master of the household, the regional lord; his wife; Lady Lilia; another of the palace maids; and a number of people from my own house.

All of them were concerned about Lady Elianna's safety, but I had no answers to offer them either way. For the moment, I had them relocate to a separate room before relaying what facts we knew, including the state of the Black Wing Knights and how the carriages had been attacked. I also told them that despite a daylong search, Lady Elianna remained unaccounted for.

Lady Lilia chewed her lip as she listened. I could already tell what she was going to say before she even opened her mouth.

"You know nothing about the lay of the land here," I warned her preemptively. "Even if you went out there to search, I don't see how you could be of any help. Please sit tight and wait here for any news."

"But...!" she started to protest before she faltered.

The way she reflexively tried to argue the point with me reminded me of my younger sister, Therese. She was pregnant and back in the capital where the plague was spreading. I worried for her, certainly, but my duty was to focus on the situation unfolding here in Ralshen.

Lady Lilia glared at me, vexed by how powerless she was. "But right this minute, Miss Eli might be out there somewhere, injured. She might be in trouble. She might need our help!"

Her words cut deeper than she knew, because I'd already found myself thinking the same things. My mind kept entertaining all the

what-ifs.

I swallowed back my emotions, stuffing them down deep inside me. My position demanded that I be cold and calculating, even at the cost of compassion toward those I cared for.

"If the people who ambushed the carriages intended to cause Lady Elianna harm, they would have done so there at the scene," I said. "However, there is nothing to indicate that such a thing transpired. If their intention had been to capture her and use her as a hostage against His Highness or the rest of us, then we should have received some sort of communication from them indicating their demands. On the other hand, if Lady Elianna and the others managed to escape, we should get word from them eventually. I should note that Alan and the others with her were nowhere to be found either. All we can do for the moment is wait for news to come."

Lady Lilia grew pale as she stood there in silence. The other maid leaned in and tried to console her. *How immature*, was the first spiteful thought that popped into my mind. But again, I tamped down my emotions. Perhaps I was cranky too, thanks to the cold, the exhaustion, and my own concerns for Lady Elianna and the others.

In the midst of this, the young earl stared straight at me and asked, "Alexei, is it possible that someone out there wanted to intervene? To stop them from quelling the revolt?"

Lady Lilia's head jerked up, her mouth falling open.

Bitter though I was about her unbecoming behavior, I calmly replied, "It's not impossible, but if that were that the case, Carl, it would stand to reason that the attacker would have some relation to you or your house. However, according to what the surviving Black Wing Knights have told us, the attackers did not target the doctors accompanying Lady Elianna. They went instead straight for the carriage she was in, so we can assume she is who they were after."

"Still..." he said, trailing off. I could hear the self-blame in his tone, for I shared the same guilt. And as if to voice our shared lament, he further blurted, "If only I had gone instead."

As the regional lord of Ralshen, Carl had detailed knowledge of each town and area in his lands. He was the chief administrator, so it was his duty to hand out orders and carry out negotiations with neighboring territories. He could not abandon his own obligations to attend to a revolt in one single town.

When the discussions first took place and Lady Elianna held her head high, determination and strength burning in her eyes as she volunteered herself for the task, she'd seemed in our eyes a hero of the people. She had surely bewitched every person in the room with her charisma. The others, like myself, likely thought that she would, without a doubt, be our next queen—that she would be someone we

would serve in the future.

I didn't want to believe we had made a mistake in entrusting this matter to her. At the same time, I couldn't help entertaining the thought that things might be different now if I had gone instead of her. Maybe then I wouldn't feel such crushing guilt. Maybe then there wouldn't be such an oppressive atmosphere in the air as Lady Lilia glared at me with unspoken blame, eyes shimmering with unshed tears.

"Regardless," interrupted a quiet yet unwavering voice, "all we can do for the moment is wait for word about Lady Elianna. In the meantime, we should be focusing on what we can do to effect change. Should we not be sending an envoy to the town at the foot of Mt. Urma?"

It was the countess who now addressed the group. She, like the others, had entrusted her hope and desire to protect the people to Lady Elianna, but in spite of the dire situation, she showed no signs of having lost hope. If anything, she was shining with an inner strength.

Women were strong. My mother had proven that with her bravery. Elianna had proven it too by the way she had dared to confront the country's hero, General Bakula, head-on. The countess was yet another example with her sobering words.

"We need to make adjustments to our original plans," I stated. "The other carriages that left with Lady Elianna were not unharmed in the attack, unfortunately, so we'll need to organize a new medical team, arrange for medicine, provisions, and other supplies, and confirm the extent of the plague's spread."

As I spoke, the blizzard pounded on the window beside me. Everyone's gaze was drawn to the rattling glass. I had brushed off the accumulation of snow on my outer garments as I ducked inside the warm estate earlier, but since then, the weather had begun to steadily worsen. One need only glance outside to notice the storm was picking up.

The original plan was to have Lady Elianna go first to quell the uprising and confirm the state of things in the town, then Lady Lilia and the others would haul in supplies. But with the weather the way it was right now...

The weight of obligation had sat so heavy on my shoulders, but it was as though I had hung it up outside and left it there. Now, trapped in a mansion with those already infected by the Ashen Nightmare, I had only my own impatience as company, but I was determined to rally my spirits.

I began scrambling to make all the arrangements I could in the days that followed. My nerves were on edge, concerned for the sick inside the estate. Equally worrying was the possibility that the rest of

us could contract the disease. Each day was tiringly full of anxiety.

The situation didn't really begin to change until four days after the original report about the attack on Lady Elianna's convoy. The royal family's Shadows delivered a missive from Alan. I would be lying if I said I didn't find the contents of it shocking. Though, to be truthful, it had taken so long for him to contact me that I had already feared the worst. A suffocating sense of dread had overtaken me with each day I hadn't heard from him.

I had swallowed hard upon receiving the report, and no sooner had I glanced through it than I found myself gritting my teeth.

Lady Elianna had survived and no one was injured. They had also rendezvoused with the Malduran prince, who had swooped in to help save them. And now, they knew the true aim of the mastermind behind all of this. Unfortunately, Jean, one of the royal family's Shadows, had betrayed us. Nevertheless, they had found Furya's Jar and were already working on a cure.

I let out a shaky breath.

A cure...

The letter crinkled in my hand, distorting the writing on the page as I clenched it tight. Was what he claimed really happening? Furya's Jar was only a legend, but they had found someone with knowledge so vast and great it could be likened to myth. Lady Elianna had really done it. She'd pulled it off.

Fiery hot emotion welled up in my chest. This was uncharacteristic of me, but how could I not feel excitement? I suspected that no one else—not even myself—could accomplish what Lady Elianna had.

Before leaving the capital, the prince had entrusted her with the only clue we had. She had managed to use it, in such a short amount of time, to accomplish a miracle. Words of praise for her deeds sat unspoken on my lips, accompanied by a smile. Servants nearby gasped at this show of emotion from me.

I had to banish my excitement in order to return to my usual cool, collected self. Though progress had been made, the results were not yet final. We had to ensure that we didn't somehow lose the woman who had achieved all of this, or the cure she was seeing created for the Ashen Nightmare. Never again did I want to live through the torment I had these past couple of days.

Securing Lady Elianna's safety was my absolute top priority, both for the sake of His Highness as well as the nation. To that end, I hastily arranged for an armed escort. This time, I made absolutely certain that not a word of our plans would leak to the enemy. I swore to myself, swore on my position as one of the crown prince's closest confidants, that I would not allow that to happen ever again.

What I didn't realize was that my inner resolve manifested in an air of intimidation that left everyone around me shrinking in fear.

Numerous secret meetings had followed that initial report, leading up to this morning.

Considering the amount of snow on the ground, it would take half a day to reach Hersche from the earl's estate. I had taken into account all the information trickling in, alongside current circumstances, and had decided this plan was the only possible one I could go with. The moment I'd proposed it, I was prepared to shoulder whatever happened. The man I had called after must have steeled himself as well, having accepted that proposal. There was no need to say anything more to him.

Shadows hung thick across the land, waiting for the sun to creep up.

The man's eyes were empty, save for the reflection of the torchlight that illuminated them. Just as I rallied myself, ready to say something, he beat me to it by saying the very thing I had wanted to.

"Alexei, be careful out there."

When I'd first arrived in the Ralshen Region, he had welcomed me with hate and animosity. Naturally, I was taken aback by this shift, and my shock must have shown on my face.

His expression soured, his tone turning bitter as he continued, "There's still a lot more I have to say to you, so don't think you're getting off the hook that easily. You have an obligation to hear all the resentment I've saved up for you. So live, Alexei Strasser. Live and come back here safely."

My lips cracked into a smile for the first time in a very, very long while. I never would have dreamed when I departed for Ralshen that I would one day be able to smile here again. Nor did I think I would be able to speak to him as casually as I was now.

"You be careful too, Carl. You still need a lot of improvement when it comes to managing your territory." I paused, then added, "When I return, I will whip you into shape."

Carl pulled a face at me, displeased.

We were both riding off into danger, but for some reason, my shoulders felt so much lighter. We each prayed for the other's safety as we parted ways. I opened the door to my carriage, and for the briefest moment, I hesitated. I knew I was being watched, but I pretended not to notice.

In the early morning, as the snow stopped temporarily, the clatter of carriages and the beat of horse hooves echoed around the earl's estate, announcing our departure.

Damn it! I couldn't even count how many times I'd cursed under my breath at this point. For the past five days, we'd divided into groups and either kept a lookout or gathered information.

The town of Hersche was known for its many inns; lanterns glowed there day and night. A steady stream of people were coming and going under the threat of snow. Many of them had come by the horseload from neighboring areas, so it was quite easy to slip into the crowd, but we still couldn't locate our target amidst the clamor. The minute I thought I'd spotted them, some other disturbance would spread the people through the streets like a piece of boiled cloth unfurling in a cauldron, and I'd lose sight of them.

To put it simply, everyone was in the way. I wanted to burn the entire town to the ground multiple times over, due to the way my target kept weaving through the crowd. It was my job to track them, but it was turning out to be a nightmare. That would all end today, however.

"Watteau."

I gave Jean a look, acknowledging his signal. It'd been incredibly difficult to pinpoint my target in the crowded town, but I'd received some very valuable information from a guard posted at Earl Ralshen's estate. Alexei Strasser, one of the crown prince's closest confidantes, was leading a group of guards toward this very city. In addition, a wagon carrying Earl Ralshen's supplies was following close behind Alexei's carriage.

I could surmise two things from that information. One, the objective of Alexei Strasser and his band of guards was to both secure and protect the crown prince's fiancée. Second, Earl Ralshen's wagon was carrying medicine to treat the Ashen Nightmare and was heading to the Urma Mines. Naturally, that meant our target must have realized that we were after them, and since they were *still* moving forward despite this knowledge, that must mean...

I'd already reached a conclusion long before I noticed the glint in the eyes of the unpleasant man beside me.

"The young miss is headin' for the revolt," Jean explained.

Spiteful thoughts ran through my head. Did that mean Alexei Strasser's guards were only a diversion so that Earl Ralshen's supplies could sneak through?

Jean then asked me what I thought, and I replied, "We'll just have to see for ourselves."

Our number one target was the crown prince's fiancée, Elianna Bernstein, and our primary objective was to get rid of her. That wouldn't change, but...

“If the Bibliophile Princess is headed to the Urma Mines with the supplies,” Jean added, “then Alexei Strasser’s guards must have the medicine, and they’re headin’ to the capital with it. That ain’t good, is it, Watteau?”

I replied back with irritation. We’d been given an order beforehand, in case of an emergency: if someone developed a cure—however impossible that might be—we were to steal it before it could spread throughout the world.

The Ashen Nightmare was a deadly plague feared by all. Not even my master could’ve imagined that someone would find a cure for it. Still, we’d been ordered to erase all clues leading to one and focus our attention on the capital in order to boost the Saint’s popularity, but now it felt like all of that was about to be undermined. Our master’s orders were absolute. We *must* steal the cure and then deliver it to the capital so we could solidify the Saint’s status as a hero, the messiah of our realm—a Saint they would extol in legends. Nevertheless...

“Got no choice but to split up,” Jean said. “We’ll be a bit shorthanded, but nothin’ else we can do, is there?”

“Shut up, Jean!” I growled.

I glared at the sullen man, who dully responded, “Right, then.” That just made me curse under my breath even more. He never pushed back, never even shrugged. Everything I said was just air that blew past him. No matter how I took my emotions out on him, he was always like this.

Jean had always had that cool, listless way about him. He lacked tenacity, and you could never tell what he was thinking. Nevertheless, he steadily plugged away at his tasks, so perhaps in that way he was well-suited to be one of the royal family’s Shadows. Like a shadow, he was lifeless and lacked substance. Although we were of equal skill, the other Shadows continued to compare my abilities to his. My master had brought him to the forefront and into the light.

As long as I could remember, this detestable man had been a thorn in my side. Just looking at him made me annoyed. A hatred for him churned inside of my stomach, and I couldn’t stop it. This mission would be his final chance. If he screwed up this time...if he failed to finish off our target, it would be a breach of trust. If that happened, I could finally get rid of the source of my annoyance. I imagined how much relief I’d feel in that moment.

I kept a close eye on Jean and signaled to my associate. I’d already figured out which road the guard’s carriage would be using. I hated that Jean was right, but it was true—this was our only choice. I ordered the others to their positions; we would act as the main unit and lie in wait to ensure we got our target.

Even though it was late afternoon and snowy in the town of

Hersche, it was still bustling with people traveling to and fro. I'd watched this inn for some kind of opening so many times, wondering if we could ambush them. All the residents were focused on that spot, so our target must be using it as their base.

Just then, Alexei Strasser's band of guards arrived at the inn, and a woman emerged from within a carriage. She was wearing simple clothing and looked to be around seventeen or eighteen. She concealed her face so as not to be recognized. The woman named Mabel—her attendant—was at her side.

"That's her, all right," I whispered.

As I watched her closely, I received news that Alexei Strasser had gotten back into his carriage and that the woman, who seemed to be acting as a decoy, had not joined him. Another woman did join him, though. I saw a lock of hair spill from her hood before Alexei got into the carriage—her signature platinum blonde hair which fell to her waist in waves. I watched as she and her attendant climbed into Alexei Strasser's carriage, which was surrounded by bodyguards. I let out a scornful chuckle.

"Looks like your 'young miss' values her own life over that of the rioters or the ill."

I'd expect nothing less from a sheltered, spoiled little rich girl, I thought with another jeering laugh. Only this one time did I actually feel relieved that my colleague remained unresponsive.

Now that I thought about it, it made perfect sense. She was a naive, sheltered girl from a rich family who'd come far from the capital to a place ridden with a terrible disease everyone feared, under the threat of constant attack. Why wouldn't she be afraid? She had a lot of responsibility as the crown prince's betrothed, but she was still just a young noblewoman. It'd be no wonder if she'd sat trembling in her room at the inn until someone had come to save her.

"Waste of my damn time," I cursed at Jean, then signaled the others. I left a line of guards to prevent our target from escaping in the meantime and took the main unit with me to circle around to the spot where we would launch the attack.

We'd have to be careful of Earl Ralshen's guards when it came time for me to give the signal to steal the medicine and attack, but this time, we'd get rid of her for good. Even though I was a bit worried about the number of people there, we had only one target. We had no reason to engage with the entire band of guards or to compete with the other Shadows of the royal family, which I was sure were there somewhere as well. We had only one goal, and that was to get rid of Elianna Bernstein.

The mountain pass which led to Hersche was piled high with snow. It was very narrow, so it was difficult for horses and carriages

to turn around, which would greatly restrict our target's movement, but it was ideal conditions for us. Since we weren't on horseback, we had the advantage.

We were far away from any neighboring cities, so I was certain that this mission would succeed as I gave the signal to attack. I'd make sure to keep my eyes on the man next to me and watch his actions very closely. I'd wait for a moment's hesitation, then get rid of him. My heart beat with anticipation for that very moment.

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Alexei Strasser and the others resisted the ambush more than I'd expected.

We waited until right before they'd made it to the main road, just where they'd let their guard down, and attacked. Confusion spread through the guards, and we took advantage of the disruption in command to move around as we pleased. We advanced like the Shadows we were—or used to be—circling around behind them.

All of a sudden, something echoed in the distance. How had I heard *that* sound among the chaos of angry shouts and clanging swords? The reason was that it was an unusual noise—that of a flare used in case of emergency. I knew in an instant that it was a smoke screen, but only afterward did I realize that our side was the only one startled by it.

I narrowly avoided a decisive blow swinging down at me as I heard the sounds of my comrades getting hit. But just as I tried to right myself, the edge of a blade drew closer.

“Watteau...”

I sensed the wordless presence of someone nearby and cursed in pain as my irritation grew. I managed to strike back at them, but mine wasn't a shallow cut. And I recognized the swordsmanship. The organization which had existed for as long as I could remember—this was the same way those who'd undergone such training attacked without hesitation—the royal family's Shadows.

The moment I realized they were with the guards, I knew without a doubt that my target was there, inside the carriage that the Shadows and the guards were protecting. I thought I was just close enough to my target to act, when suddenly the carriage door burst open and a figure appeared, descending one of the steps. They had a noble air to them that commanded the attention of everyone around them. It was a small young woman—our target.

She cast aside the cloak which had concealed her identity thus far, and with it the signature platinum blonde locks, which she now held against her chest. She looked like a female general shouting in triumph.

“You foolish attackers fell for our trap. I am Lilia Storrev, the cousin of Lady Eli—Elianna Bernstein, the fiancée of the crown prince of Sauslind. You may be after Lady Eli, but she is not here. My condolences.” She let out a haughty laugh, and a strange sense of confusion rolled through my associates.

Behind the triumphant girl with the chestnut hair was Alexei Strasser, who looked quite exasperated, and the attendant Mabel, who *should* have been with the Bibliophile Princess, but was here wearing a look on her face similar to Alexei Strasser’s.

The carriage was surrounded by guards armed with shields to protect against flying daggers or arrows. I wondered if our target was still there, behind those three. We had no reason to believe the girl who spoke, and so we began fighting again, trying to aim for our target. When the girl saw this, she looked at us with a mixture of sympathy and anger in her eyes.

“You know, I’m really mad,” she cried. “I had to crawl into the hidden compartment in Lord Alexei’s carriage! It was cramped and cold and hard to breathe, and did I mention it was cold?! Honestly, I thought I was going to become a living ice sculpture! So not only did I have to put my dignity aside and crawl on the floor like a rat in the hidden compartment, but then, when we got to the inn...”

All of a sudden her rage exploded. “She wasn’t there! Lady Eli had cut a lock of her hair according to the plan and entrusted it with Mabel, but she wasn’t there! Listen, I *know* that was the plan, but I was fully intending on seeing with my own eyes that she was safe and sound, then tugging on both her cheeks and ears and yelling at her! *Honestly!*”

We were dumbfounded that this girl was taking her anger and frustration out on her attackers. This Lilia Storrev was steaming mad, and we were her targets.

“You made Lady Eli *cut her hair!* But most of all, you tried to kill her, and for that, I will never forgive you! In the name of Prince Christopher, I shall give you fools your divine punishment!”

This sounded less like a well-thought-out sentiment, and more like an emotional description of the current circumstances, which made it clear what was going on. I couldn’t deny the possibility that she was all talk, but given the mood in the air, our instincts, which could sense the location of our target, told us that the girl was indeed telling the truth: Elianna Bernstein was not here.

“Watteau.”

I was angry at the owner of the voice, who was urging us to retreat. He had been right all along. Elianna Bernstein wasn’t here; she was with Earl Ralshen’s wagon of supplies.

“Damn it.” I gave the order to retreat and to go help with the

other attack, but I heard a cold voice quietly say, "It's no use."

I looked up to see that the energetic Lilia Storrev had been pushed back, and now Alexei Strasser was looking over us with an icy glare. "If you're thinking about attacking Earl Ralshen's supply wagon, it's no use."

He sounded as if he was just stating a fact. I frowned, and a smile spread across his cool countenance, one which indicated it was likely an unusual sight.

"It's only natural that you would be targeting Lady Elianna, but the medicine... Your master, the one who ordered you to assassinate Lady Elianna, thought a cure was impossible, yet we still found one. Do you really think he'll overlook this?"

He answered his own question in a voice colder than snow piled up on the mountaintops.

"We took preventative measures with the supply wagon as well. If you didn't attack it, then it would be nothing more than a smoke screen. However, if you *did* try to target her *and* attack the wagon..."

He paused meaningfully, and my mind raced as I wondered what he was trying to say. His cold gaze froze us all to the spot.

"Well, let's just say you did split into two groups to attack both. If that were true, then the other group has either been captured or killed by the Black Wing Knights hidden inside the wagon. Ever since the Knights lost their beloved General Bakula, their grief has turned into rage. One hot-blooded person is already more than enough for me to handle." His tone indicated he was at a loss for what to do with these soldiers, who were burning with anger.

The Black Wing Knights. The mention of them reminded me of something I'd completely forgotten about. After losing General Bakula, I'd figured they would've gone back to the capital with his remains to protect them on the journey. I hadn't thought about just how heavy the sadness of losing their commander, a national hero, would've weighed on them. I cursed myself for not considering this as Alexei continued speaking in a wholly unabashed voice.

"I didn't expect for you to fall for it so marvelously."

With that, I was now certain that it was us who'd fallen into a trap, though there'd been no behavior from anyone so far to make me suspect it. Not once since the countess, Earl Ralshen's wife, left the earl's estate to negotiate with other territories did I suspect there was a trap.

I thought it over, then came to a realization. They hadn't shared their plan with anyone—not even their comrades—so even though there were so many moving parts, none of the players had seemed suspicious to us.

"Impossible!" a voice scoffed from our side.

Alexei let out a laugh so deep it sounded like it resounded from the belly of the earth. “If you don’t believe me, go ahead and search the carriage from top to bottom. Then once you’re satisfied, go join up with Earl Ralshen’s supplies. I’m sure you’ll be satisfied once you see for yourselves that Lady Elianna is not in either place.”

So where the hell is she? I wondered, but then I immediately put two and two together. The flare that was shot immediately after we attacked—we’d heard it from a distance. And right after that, the Bibliophile Princess’s stand-in and cousin had proudly revealed her identity. The guards had only hesitated at the very beginning, but they hadn’t been surprised by the sound of the flare. Plus, Alexei Strasser looked supremely confident right now.

“Don’t tell me...” I muttered.

They’d set multiple traps prior to leaving Earl Ralshen’s estate, but they hadn’t even notified their comrade, the duchess. They’d made both groups, the guards and the earl’s supply wagon, think they were transporting Elianna Bernstein. And now, the Bibliophile Princess was...

I groaned despite myself, prompting a satisfied smile from Alexei Strasser that seemed to say, “*I tricked you, you fool.*”

“Lady Eli has already arrived at the Urma Mines with the cure. Her name will be known all throughout the world, held in such esteem that your master will be powerless to stop it.”

Once someone’s name rose to that kind of notoriety, word of her would spread no matter what we tried to do to stop it, just as the Lady Saint’s reputation had spread through the capital.

Our anger over falling for this trap caused the fighting to resume, but the road was far too narrow, and we were woefully outnumbered and surrounded. No matter how I thought about it, we were the ones who’d walked right into such an unwinnable position. But...I wouldn’t let it end like this.

A strong emotion, like a deep-seated hatred, consumed me, stirring me to action.

Chapter 6: A Messenger at Sunset

“Please!” I begged again, not sure how many times I had offered that desperate prayer.

The mining town of Modzth was in the northern part of Ralshen, at the foot of Mt. Urma. There was a building on the edge of town, which was used as both a shrine and a meeting hall, and the residents, including many who were ill, had barricaded themselves inside. If the main road leading to Modzth was blocked, there would be no other way to get there.

I, Countess Rachel Ralshen, Earl Ralshen’s wife, had been standing in front of a defensive wall composed of all sorts of objects close to all day now, trying to get through.

“Please take down the wall and let the government officials through! I promise to guarantee the safety of your sick. Please! I’m begging you!”

As expected, I heard an angry voice on the other side once again commanding me to leave.

“I don’t know a thing about a countess, but just one of you isn’t gonna save any of our sick! We’ll take food, but we don’t want no empty promises! And until we get guaranteed proof that something will save our sick, the government officials are going down with us!”

I heard gasping and suppressed screams from around me. I somehow managed to stave off my tears and was about to plead once more when the guard behind me stopped me. “Lady Rachel, please. You’ve been at this ever since this morning with no rest. Please take a break.”

I looked around and realized that the sun was already setting—not surprising for this northern territory. I’d left the estate early the previous morning. The snow had stopped, so we’d taken advantage of that to depart under the guise of negotiating with a neighboring territory. We’d had to take the long way here, but my small number of guards and I had met with our supply troops on a separate city road, then rushed here as fast as we could. We didn’t travel around Hersche, but we took the road directly toward the Urma Mines.

Due to the weather, it was nightfall by the time we arrived, so there had been nothing we could do but wait for the morning. I’d been pleading with the people on the other side of the wall ever since the sun had even risen.

My attendant from the estate chimed in from beside me. “Lady Rachel, your voice has been hoarse for some time now. Please, please let’s just wait until the earl arrives.”

She had been my attendant ever since I was a young girl, and I was sure she’d wondered numerous times just what kind of situation I’d married into. She never said it out loud, of course, but ever since I married the earl, I could tell she thought so by the way she acted. Now, however, she wasn’t suppressing it as she had before; it was apparent on her face. She was thinking I’d gotten to this point all because of Earl Ralshen and the problems this land carried with it.

I shook my head at her and my guards. I knew all of them thought I was some helpless person who needed protection, but back then, I’d seen the kind of person I wanted to be.

“I’m not a Havelly anymore. I belong to the Ralshen family. I am Carl’s wife, and I’m here because of Ralshen—for the people who live here.”

The Sauslind royal family wouldn’t abandon the people of Ralshen. Elianna had declared it, and I needed to be more like her. She took her duty as the crown prince’s betrothed very seriously.

I might have a long way to go, but I needed to persist to get as close as I could to the convictions I admired. “I am the countess of Ralshen, and I am going to fulfill my responsibilities as such.” That was the promise I had made.

My attendant and my guards didn’t know of the plan that the crown prince’s right-hand man had meticulously devised after careful scrutiny of much information. Only a handful of people at the earl’s estate were made aware of the plan, but if it worked, Carl might not be able to make it here. Before I left the estate, we’d made a promise to each other. “*Rachel*,” he’d said. “*Take care of the people*.” His eyes had been full of resolve, knowing he was about to go into danger, so I’d made that promise to him.

I balled my hands into fists with renewed resolve. I would convince them, no matter what it took. Even if they wouldn’t let everyone inside go, I’d at least get them to take down the wall.

I started yelling again, and then suddenly, the man who led the rebellion, who we’d confronted when we arrived last night, appeared. Raqqa Arkto was the representative of the Urma Mines, and he spoke for all the different groups of miners, no matter how great or small. He had power and influence over the town, and very few dared to go against his decisions. In other words, he was the ringleader.

My breath caught in my throat because I had a hunch I wouldn’t be able to convince him. In that case, we would have to force our way through.

As expected, he refused to comply. He didn’t raise his voice, but it

dripped with anger. “Countess Rachel Ralshen, is it? Nobles who sit on their high horses like you don’t care about the little people like us. We’re nothing but weeds to you. But I won’t forget. I won’t forget the battlefield forty years ago, and I won’t forget the stench of death that spread throughout our town sixteen years ago.”

His words stabbed through me. His eyes, which didn’t know me, had seen death twice—first in the great war, and then in that city of death.

“It was the same thing forty years ago. I was a young boy, barely ten years of age, but I remember it clear as day. The royal family sent messengers and soldiers who deceived us. They left our town vulnerable to invaders and pillagers all in the name of defending the kingdom. Well, the kingdom abandoned us! I’ve never forgotten the voices of my brothers and sisters as they died. I’ll never forget the ruins of that city.”

I could tell by the subdued tone of his voice that he was filled with hatred and sadness. I had only recently married into this position, so my knowledge of this land’s history was something I had learned but not experienced. Still, these people’s lives depended on me. I told myself I couldn’t falter when I heard him say my name once again, in a tone that suggested he understood my position even better than those around me.

“Countess Ralshen, we need more than just lip service. What we want is the pomelo fruit, something only distributed to the capital. And we want the Lady Saint, because it’s said as long as she exists, we can’t get sick! Bring us the Lady Saint! If the royal family lets us have her, we’ll take down the wall. And then we’ll trust that you actually mean what you say and that they’re not just empty promises!”

As Raqqa Arkto stood on top of the wall, he not only rejected us, the ones who had come to quell the rebellion, but he tried to pin us down from another direction as well. Rumors of this saint had flown around the capital. She was supposedly the daughter of a duke who had ties to the royal family. Even though I was a countess who presided over our own domain, this saint was a person far higher than me.

“But how?” I blurted out.

Raqqa Arkto mercilessly declared, “If you don’t meet our demands, then I’ll toss the government officials in there with the sick, Countess. If you’re the one responsible for this place, then lemme hear another one of your empty promises. Tell me you’ll bring me the Lady Saint!”

I was speechless. He knew that I couldn’t bring the Saint here, and it wasn’t just a problem of transporting her. For example, even if we could bring the esteemed duke’s daughter from the royal capital to

this northern mountain town—even if it were possible—was the Saint’s power even real?

The Saint would not leave the royal capital, Saoura, where the nobles and the fortunate people lived. She belonged to the royal family, and she gave her blessings only to the royal capital. Could you even call someone who only helped if it was convenient for her a saint? It was said as long as they had the Lady Saint, they wouldn’t get sick, but what about the people who were ill now, the ones on the verge of death? Who would save them?

The man before me voiced all the doubts in my head. He had discerning eyes, the kind that saw the truth and could not be deceived. “The royal family—and everyone in the upper crust—always deceives us regular folks and manipulates us. They probably think it’s no big deal to abandon disobedient people; there’ll always be more born to replace us, after all. Are our lives really worth that little? Are we really that lowly, that insignificant to you nobles?”

I wanted to tell him no, but the words wouldn’t come out. It seemed even their thoughts had been taken captive by the hopeless plague that was the Ashen Nightmare. Or, perhaps, they had always felt this way. It had never come to the surface, but the people of Ralshen had always distrusted the royal family and the kingdom, and right now, they were just confronting it.

“We won’t compromise. Unless we see something that will absolutely cure our sick, everyone else is coming down with us!”

I caught a glimpse of the desperate resolve people had only when they were backed into a corner.

“Anyway,” Raqqa continued with sarcasm, “you nobles would prefer if us rebels and our sick just died all at once! It’d be more convenient for you!”

“That’s not true...” I protested, but honestly, I wasn’t sure what to do. Raqqa and those who had experienced the great war and the sickness had already made up their minds. I frantically tried to think of something else I could do, but then I heard angry voices among my guards.

“Lady Rachel. Nothing else you say will get through to them. Some of the government officials they are holding captive were dispatched by the kingdom. If we can’t free them from the rebels and guarantee their safety, Ralshen will be seen as rebelling against the kingdom.”

The rebels would no longer be regarded as an isolated group; the whole of Ralshen would be viewed as revolting against the kingdom.

“Wait... Everyone please calm down!” I tried to hold back the soldiers, but most of them had their hands on their swords and were ready to fight. They were staring down the residents of Modzth, who

were armed with hammers and pickaxes.

As I watched this scene unfold, I desperately tried to figure out what I should do, but I was wholly unprepared for such a thing and on the verge of tears. Nonetheless, Carl had entrusted this duty to me. I had to do something on my own. I'd promised him and come all this way!

"Please, everyone calm down!"

If the soldiers drew their weapons against our citizens, it would all be over. My husband had fought hard to avoid this very thing from happening, and I frantically tried to hold my soldiers back, but then I saw the glint of swords being drawn. I despaired as I stood in their way, a mass of emotions swirling inside of me.

For some reason, I felt my attention being drawn to the sky, tinged with the colors of sunset and clouded with snow. It was the strangest mixture of colors. Then all of a sudden, I realized why my eye had been drawn to it. I saw a flare spreading across the sky and then heard a loud noise. It was an emergency signal in towns across the realm and was loud enough that the sound could travel over several neighboring towns. The explosion was so powerful that the color of it could be seen from far away. It was a color I hadn't seen in some time—a clear blue.

"Huh...?" I murmured, and I could tell everyone around me was staring at it too.

"An emergency flare...? Who could have set it off?"

When there was an emergency, the color was red, but this one was blue, the color signaling to neighboring towns far and wide that there was a larger crisis at hand. Who would have sent that?

Confusion spread throughout the area. Just then, I heard the sound of hoofbeats and the high-pitched whinnies of horses. Several people on horseback were coming straight this way. The moment I spotted them, they galloped right to us in a flash. I flinched, squeezing my eyes shut. I could feel the heat and the presence of the horses, even the sound of their ragged breaths—that's how close they were.

A clear voice rang out from above. "People of Modzth and the Urma Mines, I urge you to please calm down."

I could tell by the way she panted that she had raced here in a hurry, yet her voice was quiet and calm. I looked up and saw two small figures on horseback, surrounded by a glow from the light in the sky behind them. Although the owner of the voice was small, she had a commanding presence.

"Who are you?" Raqqa Arkto asked in a suspicious tone, but she spoke so clearly, so strongly, that not even he could make her falter.

The ones most surprised by what she said next were us—the people who'd come from the earl's estate.

“I am Elianna Bernstein.”

Confused murmurs rose from the crowd. Some citizens asked, “Who?” but then realized this was the crown prince’s fiancée. The guards and I could do nothing but look up in shock, of course. Her name had been whispered so quietly because supposedly she was on her way to deliver the treatment for the Ashen Nightmare to His Majesty at the capital. Or at least, that was what I had heard. So why would she be here in this cloistered mountain town, full of rebels and the sick?

“Don’t lie!” Raqqa Arkto spat in a deep voice, his words rife with emotion. Since he was standing on top of the wall, he was at eye level with those on horseback. “That’s impossible! As if anyone would believe you! I heard the crown prince’s fiancée, Elianna Bernstein, had run away! She ran because she was afraid of the Ashen Nightmare. She’s no different than all the other people who have abandoned Ralshen and the sick! No one’s gonna believe you!” His body shook with anger.

The miners around us raised their voices in assent. “We won’t believe you! Show us some proof!” they yelled.

I was thinking the same thing myself, to be honest. After all, my beloved Carl and Lord Alexei had acted as a diversion so she could escape to the capital. That was why I had come here to quell the rebels.

As I stared up at her, she reached for the cloth tied around her head and released it.



Sunset only lasted for a short time up here in the northern territory, but by some miracle, the snow had stopped just long enough for the rays of the setting sun to show through the clouds. The girl released her braided hair, its locks flowing in the wind. The platinum blonde color was practically translucent, picking up all the color of the sunset as it billowed in waves. It almost looked like a heartbeat, the symbol of life itself.

Her voice echoed with such intensity it seemed it could stir the frozen people of this town—the ones who had closed themselves tightly away in this chilly landscape—and awaken the ones who lay sleeping. It was a voice so firm and certain it could shake the air itself.

“I am Elianna Bernstein, fiancée of the crown prince of the kingdom of Sauslind. I have come here to Modzth in the name of the Sauslind royal family to save those of you who are sick. Rebels, I order you to immediately lay down your weapons and let us through!”

Her voice cut through the winter sunset, signaling the beginning of something very important.

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Silence lasted for a few moments, then the people began to stir, beginning with the citizens of Modzth, whom I, Elianna Bernstein, had faced off against. I could hear the people’s confusion coming from the gaps in the wall. Several of them were expressing doubts, in voices so small it was hard to believe they were coming from muscular miners hefting large pickaxes.

“If you’re the crown prince’s fiancée...are you gonna save my family? How?” a weak voice asked, clinging onto hope from within the depths of despair. I’d heard that same plea before, from people in Hersche whose families were stricken with the plague.

“Is it true?” another asked, lowering their pickax and taking a step forward. “Will you really save us?”

“Please save my family,” another murmured, and gradually I heard echoes all around me asking the same thing.

All of a sudden, I heard a noise, like something heavy striking another object. It was loud and fearsome. The man, whom I assumed was the leader of the rebels, had struck his stone hammer against the wall by his feet.

“You’re the crown prince’s fiancée? Ha! You look like some sheltered little rich girl. Here you are, just bursting in and making big claims about saving us, but this is a nest full of people sick with the plague! Do you have any idea what that means?”

“Yes, I do,” I replied immediately, and the man scowled at me. However, it didn’t seem to be out of malice, but more that he was

trying to suppress his emotions.

“You might catch it. You still know what that means?” he asked.

Ever since it was confirmed that the Ashen Nightmare had returned, I’d often thought about the incident sixteen years ago. Many people had been infected with the illness and died from it—children and adults, soldiers and nobles...and my own mother. Many people had lost their loved ones, and they had probably been consumed by fear, wondering if they had been the cause of their loved one’s death. *“Maybe I caught the illness somewhere and infected them? What if I’m sick too? What if—?”*

The negativity, the fear, the grief, the guilt—all of that weighed heavily on the survivors, but most heavy was the regret—the self-hatred and the self-blame.

Still, I did not waver. “Yes, I might get infected. What will you gain by hearing that? Isn’t the truth of my presence here answer enough?”

Everyone had regrets, but what happened when one kept them close and let them continue? What roads would open up from there?

Even though I didn’t speak those words aloud, the man apparently knew what was in my heart, for a slight ripple of emotion ran through his stern countenance. But then it quickly went rigid again, like the permafrost in Ralshen that would never melt.

“You’re on the royal family’s side, then, Elianna Bernstein.”

It sounded like he was saying that to remind himself. The citizens of Modzth thought of nobles as people who hid behind their titles and authority like shields, oblivious to the pain and suffering of those teetering between life and death. I could hear that anger in his voice.

“Elianna Bernstein. The crown prince’s fiancée. So, why’d you come here? And don’t tell me it’s because you’re the Lady Saint. The Saint can’t catch the illness. Did you come here to visit the sick because you think you’re the Lady Saint? You’re the Saint, so that’s why you think you’re worthy to become the crown prince’s wife? Did you come here just to boost your popularity? You’ve gotta be kidding me!”

The dull thud of his hammer once again reverberated through the earth so intensely that even I felt it on horseback.

“The sick aren’t just pawns for you nobles to play with!”

Voices behind him rang out in agreement, but then I heard another voice—one much calmer, coming from beside the leader.

“Noble lady. You coming here will not improve the situation. In fact, if you get infected here, then the royal family will ostracize Ralshen even further, and the citizens will hate the royal family in return. Nothing good can come out of this. I won’t speak ill of you, but please, leave.”

It sounded as if they were saying there was nothing I could do. “What could only four people accomplish?” they added.

Only two horses had come, and four people including myself. *Honestly, would they even believe us if we told the citizens who we were? And even if they did believe us, would our words get through to them?*

I’d asked myself that many times. It was no wonder that they didn’t believe us. They’d never met us before, and even if we had prepared ourselves for this, it would be a hard pill for them to swallow. Since they didn’t know the circumstances, it was more likely that they would reject us, since we came from the royal family’s side—the people who held the power.

So what should we do?

I thought of the charm that I kept close to my breast. I could still vividly recall the voice of the person who entrusted it to me. “*When you’re backed into a corner and desperately need help, open this... I want you to deal with the Ralshen Region. Can I entrust that task to you?*” I clenched it in my fist and then raised my face.

“It’s true that I am a noble, belonging to the Bernstein family. But the reason I came here isn’t because of my status. As I told you before, I am the crown prince’s fiancée.”

I couldn’t deny that I was on the side of those who held the power, but I needed to use that position to do anything I could to help. The repeated signs of anger were threatening to burst out again. The reason he’d given me this charm was to show it here in Ralshen, the place that felt abandoned by the royal family. I needed to use it right now.

I took out the object inside the small bag around my neck and held it high so everyone could see. The fleeting gleam of the setting sun glinted off of it. On it was engraved a treasured sword forged with the fragments of the sun, an image related to the founding of Sauslind. It was a one-of-a-kind item, modeled after the design of that treasured sword that had been raised to the heavens. There was also the moon, which colored the sword and illuminated its glory and eternal nature. It was known as a symbol of wisdom in Sauslind, a depiction of the story of the shining king and the gods who’d supported him. This object was the symbol of the kingdom; it was the royal family’s crest.

“I have been sent here in the name of the royal family of the kingdom of Sauslind, entrusted with the means to save the people from the plague. The royal family would not abandon the sick people of Ralshen. I have the cure for the Ashen Nightmare right here with me, and I declare that I will put an end to the plague right here and now!”

There was a sudden shift in the atmosphere, and not just from the rebels, but from the countess’s party too. The royal family had indeed

abandoned this land, and as a result, the region was estranged from them. I had felt their gazes of mistrust many times on my journey, when I had shown the royal crest to prove my identity. But now, as they all glared at me with those same eyes, I felt a fear and excitement I had never known before. All kinds of emotions mixed inside of me at once.

I had just claimed to have a cure for the illness under the name of the royal family, but Lady Gene had made the cure; I'd only ordered it from her. It would be meaningless for me to take sole responsibility for it, so I had to do it using the royal family's name, or else I wouldn't be able to save Ralshen.

I was going to put a stop to this, but honestly, I was afraid. If it were just me, I could take responsibility for it, no matter how bad it was—even if I went down in history as a criminal. Even if I had to lose my position as the crown prince's fiancée. Since I had made this decision, I could accept the consequences, but my fate wasn't the only thing at stake here. Many people's lives were on the line. The fate of the whole kingdom depended on this, and I couldn't allow anyone else to accept that burden for me. I wouldn't allow it.

I'd promised I wouldn't run away anymore, not from my position, or from my feelings. I'd promised I would take responsibility and face things head-on. I suppressed my emotions and stared back at the leader of the rebels.

"Why did you start your rebellion? Wasn't it because you believed the royal family and the kingdom had abandoned you? Well, I've come now with a way to save the sick. What else could you possibly want?!"

I knew there was a danger of me getting ill, but I wasn't here visiting the sick out of curiosity. I hadn't come bearing empty promises; I'd come with the one thing they'd desired, so now the only thing that was left was...

As I clenched the royal crest, I felt it digging into my hand. "The sick are waiting! Your family members, your friends, your neighbors, everyone who is suffering is fighting right this second! Your standing here questioning me is drawing out that suffering. Can't you see that?!"

A quiet noise startled me. It was the sound of something metallic hitting the ground, like someone dropping their pickaxe. Then I heard another. And another, and another. These identical sounds overlapped, and voices began calling Raqqa's name, very quietly, yet everyone could hear them.

"I trust her. I trust the royal family," one hushed voice said.

The sound of the wall being moved rumbled through the air. Then the people dispersed. A chorus of "I believe them too!" rang out, then

pleas for help.

“The royal family is going to save my family. She didn’t bring any soldiers with her. She faced us on her own, using just her words. Even though she’s with those who wield the power, she didn’t use that power over us. She didn’t try to force us. She came here all by herself to talk to us.”

More people joined in to help remove the wall. I could hear people saying, “Me too!” and “I want the cure!”

Finally, the person who had remained silent next to me on horseback spoke. “Doctor Garland! Doctor Garland, if you’re safe, answer me! It’s Gene Arman! I’ve brought the cure. I finally, finally developed a treatment that works against the Ashen Nightmare!” Lady Gene yelled triumphantly. She had insisted on accompanying me. Even though she wasn’t close to any of the residents, she’d said she had an acquaintance here, a doctor who had treated Dr. Hester’s illness.

Her voice still had a hint of girlish youth to it, but we could hear the message being relayed behind the wall. After a while, a young man answered, “Gene, is that you?”

“Doctor!” Lady Gene tumbled off the horse she was sharing with Rei and ran toward the wall, unconcerned with the barrier between them. As they both tried to speak at the same time through the wall, a new set of hoofbeats approached.

It was Lord Alan, who’d shot off the flare when I arrived, and Berndt, the innkeeper from Hersche who’d insisted on joining us.

“Raqq! Marco!” Berndt called as he rode his horse over to me, panting.

“You idiot!” came a surprised and scolding reply.

“Marco, what the hell are you doing? I know you said you won’t abandon your friends, but come on! Your wife Martha is holding down the fort all by herself! And your son... You got your priorities all messed up, you know that?!”

I wondered what on earth was going on, but then I saw the calm man who stood beside the leader of the rebels reacting. He looked shocked, clearly unaware of what was going on with his family.

The innkeeper’s lecture didn’t end there, but this time, his voice was subdued with emotion. “Raqq, I guarantee that you can trust Lady Elianna, the crown prince’s fiancée. The condition of the sick people hidden in Hersche improved. Their symptoms got better. It’s a cure. You can believe it. Don’t worry.”

Berndt spoke in a calm voice to reassure the rebels, but then he cursed at them as only a close friend could do, calling them a bunch of damned idiots. The moment the leader of the rebels dropped his hammer marked the end of the uprising.

Chapter 7: Ray of Hope

The sun set on the town of Modzth as sounds of anger and tumult rang out through the streets. Several bonfires blazed amid the falling snow while a man, torches in hand, gave out orders.

“Don’t put out the fires! People and supplies will be coming constantly from Hersche. Right now, I want the citizens of Modzth to separate and start performing tasks. We can’t let the illness spread. Mark the sick with red cloth. Those who don’t have masks to cover your mouth must take a bath first!”

The dark-haired man giving the orders was leading all of the healthy men, all miners who’d been away working in Hersche. They had been on the verge of losing their jobs due to the revolt and the unstable conditions, so I’d hired them to help with transporting goods in and around the vicinity, as well as assist with constructing temporary huts.

I, Elianna Bernstein, suddenly heard a voice call out from the direction of a nearby building. “Lady Elianna! We don’t have enough lumber. You want me to tear down the buildings around here?!”

Speaking through the cloth covering my mouth, I insisted, “No, you mustn’t! Please wait until the sun comes up to get more lumber. A roof is sufficient for now. Take the used up heat stones and the crushed sand from the ground—they have a thermal effect—and lay thick cloth over them. You can use the planks and other building materials from the torn-down barrier for the walls. The most important thing is to keep the cold air from coming in!”

“Got it!” replied Prince Irvin, a prince of Maldura, who was acting alongside me. Since I was unaccustomed to riding horses, he’d put me on his own steed and taken me to Modzth posthaste, protecting me along the way.

I had been so overwhelmed with tension and relief when those who were leading the riot had a change of heart, and Prince Irvin had been there to support me. He’d held the reins with one hand and patted me on top of my head with the other. “You did well” was all he’d said with a smile.

I’d done my very best to push my personal feelings aside, because the sun had been setting and I’d been in a hurry to do what I had to do. After I got off the horse, I’d confirmed the situation with Countess Rachel, who had arrived ahead of me, and gently chided her when she

broke down in tears. Then I'd stepped into the town, which had been closed off for so long.

So far, I had accomplished three things: I had assessed the condition of the town; I'd inquired about the status of the assembly hall, where the sick were being held; and I'd ordered the construction of several temporary huts in a separate location. At the moment, the sick were all being held in one location, but we needed to separate those who were gravely ill from those who only had slight symptoms, as well as those who were somewhere in the middle. The latter two groups would be staying in the temporary huts, while the gravely ill, who were the most in number, would receive more intensive care.

The seriously ill had developed gray spots, just like the sick people in Hersche had, so we'd already begun administering the cure to them. At first, we didn't see any noticeable change, but gradually the gray color began to fade, and after a day, the sick began to regain consciousness. I hadn't allowed myself to be too optimistic, because when they were unconscious, they couldn't drink water, cough, or inform someone if something was stuck in their throat, but now that they were awake, they could. I knew the faces of the people by their bedsides. I could hear voices telling them to "hang in there," and for people on the brink of death, those words could be enough to instill the desire to live.

Back when we were in Hersche, desperately chasing the cure, Dr. Hester had said something to me as she helped. "We herbalists and doctors can only do so much." They could examine the sick and identify and treat their symptoms. They could administer medicine that would attack the sickness at its source, but they could not regulate the workings of a body weakened beyond repair. All they could do was help lift the patient's spirits and boost their stamina. In the end, it didn't matter how effective of a treatment we developed; ultimately, the patient's survival was up to them. It was almost as if she'd been telling me that "there is no panacea in this world."

Yet there I'd been, chewing my lip nervously. Why had I worked so hard searching for Furya's Jar, then? What was the purpose of all the struggles that had led up to this very moment, of the precious people who had lost their lives and of those who had been hurt? What did it all mean?

It was then that Lord Alexei had shared his plan to deliver the cure to Modzth. When I first read the letter, I'd been incredulous, thinking it would never work, but looking back on it now, I knew that was the best course of action we could have taken.

Lilia and Mabel would act as bait. No one else could have done it. After all, Lord Alexei and Earl Ralshen had put themselves in danger too. I'd known logically that I needed to focus on the main priority,

yet my emotions just couldn't catch up. I'd been crestfallen, cursing my powerlessness and cowardice.

"Isn't the cure hope itself?" Dr. Hester's granddaughter Gene had brusquely asked me.

"This is my own personal theory," she'd said as she continued mixing the medicine. "Just because I inherited Furya's Jar doesn't mean I'll be able to come up with a cure. If anyone else had asked me to make it, I would've said no and rejected them. But because you came here..."

She kept a serious watch on the cure as she continued.

"You came all this way in search of Furya's Jar and met us. You shared the fruits of your research, even the prescription your chief herbalist made. If you weren't here, I'm not sure if I would've made this medicine or not. I don't think I would've given up, but...I'd felt like I'd hit a wall. Like my grandma says, there's only so much one person can do. That goes for doctors and herbalists too, but as long as we don't stop, as long as people don't give up, there's always hope. Isn't that what you said?"

I'd learned that Lady Gene had inherited Furya's Jar right when I thought it was lost. That's when I'd thought there might still be hope.

"Deep down inside, no one wants to give up—including the sick. Everyone wants to have hope to live, and doctors, herbalists, and nurses help because of that. Medicine is just part of it. It's just one way to keep hope alive. I think that's the cure. That's what you gave to them, isn't it?"

As long as people didn't give up, hope would always exist in this world. Although sometimes it could be vague and hard to grab hold of, it definitely existed inside the hearts of those who refused to give in. And perhaps I could give that to people—just like long ago, as detailed in Ryza's Guide, when they couldn't find that hope in their current world but entrusted it to the next.

"Lady Elianna! We don't have enough of the cure. Should we quarantine the residents or put off giving it to them until later?!" a voice asked. It was Lord Alan, who'd gone to a separate section away from where the sick were being cared for to deal with the people left behind in the town. He was also instructing the able officials.

I raised my voice, louder than I'd ever dare to speak inside the royal archives. "Prioritize administering the cure to the sick first! Others who are able to move should first go to the steam bath that Rei has arranged. After you've done that, please round them up. We don't have enough hands right now. We need to examine every citizen of Modzth carefully. Send the able men to help Lord Irvin build the temporary huts and drying huts. The ladies can help with laundry and cleaning. There is a mountain of clothes to be washed!"

“Got it!” Lord Alan responded, his cheerful response ringing out in the night.

We were all well-informed of the situation here. I’d discussed what we needed to do with them beforehand, yet they still asked me for instructions and let me repeat them. This was for the residents’ benefit, so that they could learn how we were dealing with the situation as well. The same went for calling me by my name and not a pseudonym. We wanted to emphasize the fact that the prince’s fiancée was here at the behest of the royal family—that the royal family were lending a helping hand.

Our first objective was to separate out the sick and administer the cure to those in the gravest condition. Our second objective was to investigate the state of the town while spreading information on how to prevent the infection. As we’d done that, we’d tried to recruit people who could help with things other than nursing the sick. Above all, I’d been told to take charge in the center of town, in a conspicuous place—a place where information could easily be received and assessed—somewhere visible to the guards.

While I was sorting the incoming shipments, Berndt, the innkeeper, rushed over to me out of breath. “Miss, please, I need you to come with me.” He was so frantic that there didn’t seem time to ask what was going on, so I let Lady Rachel take over for me as I followed the innkeeper. Several people came along with me, who I now recognized as Shadows from the royal family.

The mining town of Modzth had come about because workers had come together to form the town, then the kingdom had recognized it afterward. Of course, the people there had their own businesses and beliefs, just like they did anywhere. I recognized the place Berndt was taking me to as a smaller version of the assembly hall—another place of prayer. I saw a handful of people there arguing.

“I’m telling you, the cure has arrived! Stop being stubborn and come down to the city hall!”

The man who was yelling was the leader of the rebels, Raqqa Arkto. I immediately tensed at the sight of him. Under normal circumstances, someone who’d caused such riots would immediately be taken into custody, but we were in desperate need of manpower. Above all, Raqqa Arkto intimately knew this town and thus had been dispatched to help—with Berndt and the soldiers watching over him just in case.

As I overheard their argument, I observed the people there. A group of elderly people who seemed to be very set in their ways were stubbornly resisting help.

“Don’t yell at us, you dunce! You’re a darn fool for causing this ruckus! We’re only following the teachings of Ryzanity! Never mind

us! Leave us be!”

“There’s no way I’m gonna do that!” Raqqa replied. “You’ve been coughing more and more lately. Please, get tested and treated!”

“It goes against the teachings of Ryzanity! This is a trial given to us by God. He’s punishing us for our arrogance!”

I heard voices of assent among the elderly, who looked to be in their midsixties. They were a living encyclopedia of this town. They couldn’t contribute to the hard labor of mining, but they knew Modzth’s history and devoutly followed its deep-rooted teachings.

“It’s blasphemy to resist God’s trials. All we can do now is face our sins and our fate, solemnly accept them, and follow God’s will.”

“We have God Ryza with us. God will save us in our time of need. He will come to our aid.”

Ryzanity was a monotheistic religion whose followers believed in a god called Ryza. They believed that their god gave people both trials and mercy, that he gave his believers salvation, and that he could work miracles. And if that didn’t happen, they would just say that they didn’t have enough faith or that it was their time to be called to God.

Miracles. I felt so much emotion that I began to tremble, but I suppressed it as I ran toward them. The people who were arguing stopped and all turned to look at me. I calmly met their gazes and addressed them in a quiet voice.

“People of Modzth, I am Elianna Bernstein, the prince’s fiancée. I have come at the order of the royal family to examine all the people of this town. If any of you feel ill, please come forward. The rest of you must go to the steam baths. We are wiping out the source of this disease, and the Ashen Nightmare will plague this town no more.”

I would not make them the object of people’s hatred, like what had previously happened in Corba village in the Azul Region. We were in a crisis, and the disease was spreading. People could begin to view Modzth as the source of the disease, and thus its people would be scorned. I would not let that happen. I didn’t want anyone to curse the place where these people were born and raised.

“Sauslind recognizes freedom of religion. You are free to follow the teachings of Ryzanity as you wish, but we will not allow any behavior that increases the spread of the sickness,” I said firmly.

The elderly people flinched and exchanged glances. “Miss!” cried the old man who’d been arguing with Raqqa. “I know you’re trying to save this town, and we really appreciate it. Forgive us for not being able to stop these short-tempered idiots, but we’ve had enough.”

I didn’t understand what he meant. Enough of what?

“We old-timers have lived long enough. All that’s left for us to do now is to go to our God in peace. Give the medicine you brought to

the younger folks instead.”

I stared at him in silence, suddenly struck by a memory of Grandpa Teddy. *“If these old bones of mine can protect you in the meantime, then it was worth living to this ripe old age.”*

“Worth.” I felt like I had been screaming that word inside of me all along.

The old man continued. “I understand how you feel, coming all this way, but enough is enough. Put those who actually have a future first.”

I knew what he’d said, but I couldn’t register it. Instead, a torrent of feelings and conflicting memories took my breath away. I tried to speak, but nothing came out. Finally, in a strained voice, I managed to say the word “life.”

“Life isn’t just for the young or just for the old. Life is life. You are citizens of Sauslind, and I am betrothed to the prince of this realm, and I will never abandon the citizens of this kingdom!” My voice shook. I was ashamed to admit that I’d given in to my passionate feelings, and my cheeks were now wet with hot tears.

So many people had frantically come together to deliver this cure. I had spent so long completely overwhelmed by desperation and frustration; I would not wrap up their tireless efforts in a bow and write it off as a miracle—not when so many people’s hard work had been poured into it. Everyone had been looking for a miracle, a cure for this disease, but try as they might, they hadn’t been able to make it come true until now. The people who had lived and died back then had been filled with hope for the next generation, like they had been in *Ryza’s Guide*.

Many nameless researchers had wished to cure this deadly disease and devoted themselves to daily research. All their hard work had accumulated and led to us discovering this cure. I would not allow it to be written off with statements such as, “This is God’s work,” or “It’s a miracle from God.” It was human effort that had made the world what it was today. I wouldn’t allow people who were alive now to say things like, “We’ve had enough. Give it to the people who have a future!” Our predecessors had entrusted us with something precious, and that wasn’t to choose who lived and died.

“Every citizen of Modzth must be tested. I understand that you are the living history of this town, but that is precisely why you have a duty to watch the measures we are taking with a critical eye, to pass them on to the next generation. You must stay strong and live! Watch us, and continue to regard the royal family with a critical eye, so that you may point out our shortcomings in order to make the best future for everyone. Don’t say such sad things like you have already lived enough!”

I wiped my cheeks with my sleeve as I tried to contain my feelings, then asked my escorts to please guide these people to the examination area. The elderly people seemed overwhelmed by my speech and obediently followed them. I looked around to see if there was anyone else left here. That was our third objective—delivering the cure to all the sick.

Ryzanity had deep roots here in Modzth, so I had predicted that some would refuse treatment based on their religious beliefs. I knew I wouldn't be able to sway their convictions, but as long as they were citizens of this realm, I would not abandon them.

With that thought in mind, I was about to walk the perimeters of the town when a slightly stiff voice called out to me.

"Miss."

I turned around and saw the man I had first argued with, Raqqa Arkto. He was facing me with a frightening look on his face. I braced myself as I waited for him to continue.

"Thank you."

I blinked, and Raqqa clenched his fists, which were as large as small mountains, then bowed his head deeply. His behavior was the complete opposite of how it had been when he first confronted me. His voice caught in his throat and shook so terribly that I knew I was catching the town's representative in an incredibly vulnerable state. I empathized with his feelings more than he could know.

"That old man...he's the only family I got left. Thank you. Thank you for saving my family." He bowed even deeper, and several rioters who were with him did the same, echoing his words.

Lady Rachel had told me a bit about Raqqa Arkto's background. He had witnessed the ravages of the illness sixteen years ago and the war years before that. The people back then had experienced despair yet still hadn't given up hope.

Am I doing the wrong thing? I had asked myself back then. I'd hurt Grandpa Teddy and so many others when I'd impulsively acted on my own thoughts and ideas, and I constantly wondered if I had done the right thing. Perhaps what I should have done was return to the royal capital and support His Highness in this national crisis. I'd anguished over that decision again and again.

I hadn't found the answer when I immersed myself in this difficult task, throwing myself headlong into it. But now, a memory came floating back to me. It was a casual conversation I'd had long ago, when Prince Christopher and I were discussing what I thought about a book I'd read—a common, everyday occurrence.

Every time I read a history book, I wondered what the Hero King, a politician who'd stood at the forefront of history faced with a tough decision, had been thinking at that time. I was certain he'd felt many

conflicting emotions, including his own share of hesitation, yet he'd made a decision and changed the fate of this kingdom. How had he done that, I'd wondered aloud.

The voice that had responded to me was kind, but the answer was not. "I don't know either."

His eyes hadn't looked at me, but at something beyond the greenhouse that I couldn't see, far off into the blue sky.

"But sometimes we have to make a choice anyway, even if we aren't certain it's the right one at the time. That's why we need to constantly ask ourselves if we're making the right decision. Was there any other way? Did we consider everything? Have we made a mistake? Did we overlook something? We continue asking ourselves this, but when we make a decision, we must not show hesitation, because who would follow someone of authority if they looked uncertain?"

I remembered thinking that he was a king, and the thing he was gazing at was his kingdom, one that was certainly young but emitted a dazzling radiance I had never seen before. And I *wanted* to see it.

As if he had sensed my strong attraction to him, he'd suddenly shifted his eyes to me and smiled happily. The image of his smile was burned vividly upon my heart.

"Eli," he'd said, his voice full of emotion bringing me back to reality. "People will give us the answer in response to our actions, just like in those history books."

"Your Highness," I whispered to myself, once again almost overwhelmed by my feelings, but I somehow managed to hold them back.

It wasn't over. We still hadn't seen the full results yet against the illness. Whatever troubles we had in the town were trivial compared to that. Right now, we needed to spread the word that there was a cure for the Ashen Nightmare. We would make this town an example for how it worked and what was possible with people's efforts. We had to show them that salvation could be offered to anyone and spread that idea to all the cities in the realm like this one that were suffering. We had to share hope.

I reiterated my thoughts and guidelines to the people before me and made a request. "Please help me." Raqqa and the others immediately lifted their faces and responded enthusiastically.

As we sprang into action, we could see that the situation was growing more serious as time passed. First of all...

"Lady Elianna!" cried Gene. "Please send more people to care for the seriously ill! Everyone's at their limits. They've had no sleep or rest! The caregivers are in worse condition than the sick now. We were shorthanded to begin with, but at this rate, they'll develop other

illnesses if we don't do something!"

Just as I was about to respond to her, I heard another voice.

"Miss! All the families living on the outskirts of town are infected —infants too. What should we do? Separate them from their mothers? If we do that, we will need more people to look after them. And many children are sick from both the Ashen Nightmare and other illnesses."

Berndt and the inspection team kept giving me reports from all over town. The entire time I was giving instructions, I felt strongly that all this was a temporary fix and that the situation here was much worse than I had imagined. My mind raced with those thoughts, and before I could respond, the reality that soon this situation would be more than we could handle hit me like a ton of bricks.

Panic began to overwhelm me, but just then, I heard another voice calling my name. Fearing it was another dire request, I lifted my face, and then I heard a familiar voice. The long night of the northern land had finally ended and the sun was rising.

"Miss Eli!"

"Lady Elianna!"

Voices calling my name overlapped as a line of wagons carrying supplies came our way. Finally, help had arrived.

Chapter 8: Theories and Rebuilding

“People have a very frightening creature inside of them. Do you know what it is?” said a smiling young man with a gentle look on his face. This happened during a secret meeting behind closed doors at the palace, early in the new year.

The person who spoke next was known among us as the tanuki of the Sauslind royal palace, the successful minister Marquess Bernstein. “Whatever your answer may be, I shall respect it. After all, since you decided to entrust Elianna with the clue, I trust your judgment.”

At that time, the marquess had seemed angry that the prince he’d served was no more, but then he’d been seized with a different idea. He’d calmly told Prince Christopher, Glen, and me that he had obtained His Majesty’s approval for everything, so didn’t that represent a concession? His was a family that didn’t show their true intentions—not even the truth behind their hidden name—or their seriousness except to the lord they’d decided upon, so didn’t that mean the marquess was seriously confronting the prince?

Something about that had reared its ugly head inside of me—the conditions set out at the time of the engagement nearly five years ago. That’s when it had all begun, ever since those conditions were placed on the prince, which was something that any Bernstein could’ve stopped.

I, Alexei Strasser, tried not to let it show that this was an opportunity, but Chris and the marquess continued their banter as usual. They began to call each other names like “sly tanuki” and “naive bonbon,” and I could tell from the tension in the room that they were about to expose their true feelings.

I met the gaze of the young man who watched this exchange with a troubled expression. “I will give you your pearl. Does that mean we are in the same boat?” I asked. Sometimes, even those who quarreled with each other would board the same ship for a common purpose.

The young man smiled—the same elusive, gentle smile he always gave me. His voice was as serene as ever. “Alex,” he said. He was a fellow civil official of the same age, so he called me by my nickname. “If you’re going to board a ship, you’ll have to pay a fare.”

My mouth twitched slightly. It felt like he was saying that I wasn’t strong enough to ride with him. His voice had also gone deeper than usual.

“May I ask what kind of fare you want, Alfred Bernstein?” I inquired.

The gentle young man didn’t show any anger—he wore the same mild expression on his face—yet I could tell he was miffed by the soft, sarcastic tone of his voice. *I guess that shouldn’t surprise me*, I convinced myself. In the past, Alfred hadn’t seemed too happy about his younger sister becoming the next princess. There was nothing he could do about it if the prince fulfilled the marquess’s conditions and if that was what his sister decided, but he still had an air of resignation about him.

And here we were, taking all of that into consideration. I looked at Alfred and was about to respond, but he beat me to it.

“Hostility is directed toward us because of our nature,” he said in a quiet voice, with a smile on his face.

It was as if he were saying he was helpless in the face of it. Although I myself had experienced it, excellence was constantly demanded of civil officials who worked at the royal palace, especially those in the center of the government, such as the crown prince, the ministers, and the officials who served there. It was a matter of course, but if you had the sort of parentage I did, people often thought that was why you were chosen for your position. The only way to refute that was to show your ability.

However, in regards to the Bernstein family, with the exception of a few people, the public’s opinion of them at first was that they were weak nobles with no interest in power, prosperity, or career advancement, and that they were only interested in books. For those who didn’t know their hidden name, they opposed the family’s selection for this station, even though the Bernsteins were relatives of the crown prince’s fiancée. They wondered, “Why them?” Nonetheless, the display of their true abilities over the last four or five years should have silenced their critics. Now, no one doubted the Bernstein family’s ability, at least not to their faces.

“The military, is it?” I prompted.

The conflict between Marquess Bernstein, who was the Minister of Finance, and the military was well-known. I realized it even after I’d said it aloud. The Bernsteins were known as Sauslind’s Brain—the family’s hidden name—because they never stood out and, in fact, worked from the shadows. They loathed this name and the fact that they’d been bestowed with it, so would they call those who were openly hostile and jealous of them an enemy? That couldn’t be the case.

As I lost myself in my thoughts, the marquess, who was having a sarcastic exchange with His Highness, snorted. “Our enemies, both now and in the past, are only ever those who interfere with our

reading time.”

“That’s understandable,” Glen, who was nearby, murmured in a ridiculously honest way. “That’s why you view Chris as an enemy.”

Aside from that idiot, who was currently buckling under the prince’s cold stare, I figured that since the marquess had cracked a joke, it was a signal that this was the end of the meeting.

I was still inwardly panicking, though, so I decided to cut straight to the point. “If someone is targeting you, Fred, please let us know. Especially since it might have something to do with His Highness’s enemies in the future.”

Alfred chuckled softly. “That’s what I like about you, Alex.”

I clicked my tongue. Evidently, neither sarcasm nor straightforward desperation would get through to Alfred. Once again, I was reminded that this man—this whole family—liked to put up a smokescreen with others. They would wait for people to either get impatient and give up or get angry.

As I thought about how I could rephrase my plea, Alfred took the lead with a wry smile. “I wouldn’t exactly call them an enemy. At least, we never considered them so.”

Alfred was about to continue, but his father, the marquess, stopped him from saying more. “Fred,” he called in a quiet voice. I could tell by his irritated tone that he was telling his son not to say anything unnecessary.

I tried to think calmly and sort through my thoughts. There must have been an answer in what Alfred had said. The Bernsteins’ enemies were not outright opponents, and they’d never thought of them as such, so it wasn’t anyone obvious. In other words, it wasn’t Duke Odin. There was something about the meaningful look in the marquess’s eyes as he regarded His Highness. Did that mean the prince knew the identity of the enemy? Was it someone close to him?

Before I could consider this any further, the marquess stated that time was up. I still felt uneasy that I had received no clear answer, though.

Just then, Alfred called out to me. “Alex,” he said in a kind voice. It was the usual voice of the man I had hit it off with immediately and become good friends with. “This matter is not someone else’s problem. Eli is right in the thick of it. The family is already doing whatever they can to help her. If you’re desperate, then we don’t mind if you use us.”

The Bernstein family was Sauslind’s Brain, so why had they made a move? It must be because the situation was just that serious. The marquess raised his eyebrows as if to say that Alfred was talking too much, but his son ignored him. Although he was a Bernstein, Alfred would make concessions for a friend.

All sorts of predictions and speculations ran through my head, and

I was grateful to Alfred for helping me sort them out. I then remembered what he had murmured before.

“People have a very frightening creature inside of them. Do you know what it is?”

A dubious thought came to my mind. If I could understand that, then I would know what was about to happen—and who was the mastermind behind it all.

The meeting came to an end, and His Highness didn’t speak another word. As I pondered it all, only Alfred’s question remained in my head. A frightening creature. Did I have one inside of me too?

Back in the present...

“Miss Eli!” A line of carriages carrying supplies came one after the other, and a girl jumped out of one of them, looking frustrated about the traffic jam. She ran over, but the figure who stood by the temporary huts in the central square stopped her.

“Lilia, before you come any closer, you must wash your hands and gargle, then take a red cloth from over there and cover your mouth.”

Lilia looked like she was on the verge of tears. Her arms were outstretched as if she were about to embrace someone but had frozen when cautioned. Even her expression was stiff. She reminded me of a living statue like we were talking about yesterday.

Mabel, who ran up behind her, bowed and then tugged the girl away.

“Hey, Mabel!” Lady Lilia cried.

Mabel’s demeanor didn’t change even when Lady Lilia regarded her indignantly. She seemed to understand the situation. “We’ve confirmed that Lady Elianna is safe, so now the best thing for us to do is help her.”

“Oh, please! You look like you’re about to cry too!” Lady Lilia retorted.

Those two had been by Lady Elianna’s side ever since her life had first been targeted, and Lady Elianna had shared all of her hardships with them. When Lilia had to act as a decoy, she’d been as determined as she was nervous.

There could be no cracks in our strategy. We had to respect Lady Elianna’s will, otherwise we wouldn’t be able to save the people who were suffering from this terrible plague. Lady Lilia wanted to respect the wishes of the doctors, and as Lady Elianna’s attendant, she wanted to follow her mistress’s orders. But more than anything, Lady Lilia wanted to protect her.

At that time, I could tell that was what was going through Mabel’s mind—a firm determination rather than the fear of risking her own life. “This is what we came here for, so we should do what is expected

of us,” she said firmly.

I could see Lady Elianna behind Mabel, moving from the hill. A light of relief shone in her eyes the moment she saw the two of them, but I knew that the current situation wouldn’t allow her to let her guard down for even a moment.

“Miss, the Phure family insists that we hand over the cure and refuses to listen,” A middle-aged man said. “They seem to think that as long as they get it, they’ll be fine. And there’s a household of thirteen people over there, from an elderly person over the age of eighty to the eldest son of a town official. Some are showing symptoms. What should we do?”

I saw Lady Elianna’s eyes instantly change. They grew sharp, as if they couldn’t overlook a single piece of information, no matter how small.

“We can’t just blindly distribute the cure. Confirm the number of sick people. And if that’s difficult, please tell them that we have set up a free soup kitchen and ask them to come. Don’t give up even if they refuse. We just need to get them out here first.”

Lady Elianna told him that they couldn’t really understand how to deal with the illness and this situation until they saw it firsthand. “Even if just one of their family members understands, maybe they can convince the rest. And if that still doesn’t work, I’ll go talk to them myself.” She spoke in a strong, encouraging voice.

“Got it,” the man said.

Next, a particularly large man, who was keeping an eye on the situation by Lady Elianna’s side, shouted, “Berndt! If they won’t listen to you, I’ll go. Or just tell them you’re with me. Surely that’ll get at least one of them to come!”

“All right!” Berndt replied.

Then the next bit of information arrived. There was certainly no time to spare, so the representative from the group of doctors bypassed pleasantries and got right to the point, delivering a list of supplies to Lady Elianna along with his workers.

Once I saw this happen, I rushed to the place where I could purify myself. After I had my pulse and my temperature taken, I was given permission to help and received a cloth to cover my mouth. I wondered if these were the precautions Lady Elianna had devised, the ones that Mabel had spoken of.

The snow had stopped falling, and the early morning glow filled the town. Smoke was rising from many kitchens. There was a bit of confusion still, but it wasn’t chaotic. The families with sick members were sent to town all at once, so the population had increased, but the sick and the healthy, who could be hired as a labor force, were kept separate.

There was also a free soup kitchen. The fact that they could get a hot meal right away seemed to bring comfort to the townspeople and engender trust within them. Politically, I thought it was a smart move. It was winter, and since they'd been barricaded in for more than ten days, they must have been running low on food. When people were hungry, they became irritable, emotional, and irrational. Getting food in their bellies would give them a sense of security and the energy to move.

The state of the town was improving. A town that had been struck with the Ashen Nightmare, despised as a city of death, would be revived by the power of its residents. I was witnessing it with my own eyes. And the one who had brought about all of this was Elianna Bernstein, Prince Christopher's fiancée. The Ralshen Region had long been critical of the royal family, but perhaps that would change now.

As I watched Lady Elianna deal out precise instructions with unwavering confidence, I had a hard time believing that she was the same woman I had seen quietly reading in the royal archives. She certainly always had the power to move people's hearts, but she preferred to stay behind the scenes. Now, however, she was standing at the forefront, speaking carefully and sometimes raising her voice harshly. She looked so dignified I couldn't help but think of her as the future queen, though whether that was a conscious thought on my part, I could not say.

I rushed over with my subordinates, who had changed their minds, and awaited further instructions, but a man as large as a boulder stood in my way. His eyes glinted as he looked down at me, and my breath caught in my throat.

Before I could tell him my name, Lady Elianna interjected. "Raqqqa, this is Prince Christopher's right-hand man, Lord Alexei Strasser. You don't need to worry about him." At her words, the boulder of a man stepped aside without a word. I was about to ask her what in the world that was all about, but she said, "Lord Alexei, I'm so pleased that you're all right. We deeply appreciate the supplies and the manpower. There is one thing I wish to ask you right away, though. Is Earl Ralshen safe?"

At first I thought she was trying to catch me off guard, but then I remembered she wasn't privy to that information. "Carl and the Black Wing Knights are taking care of things, and part of their forces are following up. They're supposed to come later, but yes, everyone is safe."

I finally understood why she'd asked that first thing when Lady Elianna told a nearby attendant to tell Miss Rachel the news. "I'm sure she's resting," she said, "but knowing her husband is safe will ease her worries." The attendant bowed and rushed off.

Her next words also puzzled me. “Lord Alexei, I already gave these orders, but please make sure that the doctors who came with the relief squad are separated into two groups. Do not have all the doctors and nurses who have just arrived go into the assembly hall at once.”

“Why is that?” I asked.

“It’s a direct request from Lady Gene—from the pharmacists and doctors. All the sick people in the assembly hall are seriously ill, and their conditions could become worse if some other sickness is brought in from the outside. We will gradually have them take over when possible. Of course we want their help, but we need to be prudent about it.”

The temporary huts where I stood were built on a slight hill. From there, I could see that the doctors heading toward the sick were separating into two groups after they cleansed themselves.

“Also...” Lady Elianna lowered her voice, a stern look on her face. “We must at all costs avoid losing every doctor at once.”

Even though we had a cure for the Ashen Nightmare, the most important thing was that no one else fell ill. Mabel had told me about the precautions that Lady Elianna had devised, but they were still only theories, not a certainty, and we had to consider that it would be dangerous to rely on them too much.

I wondered how much Lady Elianna had grown just in the past few days, from her daily life of reading books in a quiet library and occasionally sharing her opinion, to standing in the midst of this chaotic situation—a literal moment of life and death.

How many setbacks had she gone through to recover from that disheartened state?

My chest filled with emotion. I was ashamed for predicting it would be an easy feat to revive the city of death, and I was apologetic that I had thought it was a political strategy as well. This city was still very unstable.

“Understood,” I replied. “I will manage the medical team and nurses and make sure that they are divided into two groups. Where do you want the other group to go besides the assembly hall?”

Lady Elianna held a hand-drawn map of the town spread out on a large pedestal. A black mark indicated a vacant house, and red letters showed those that had been inspected. There was a lot of other information written on it as well. Nearby, at another desk, officials stood with a list of residents in one hand, separating the sick from the healthy.

A small sliver of relief ran through Lady Elianna’s eyes as she saw I was willing to help. It seemed that she felt she could share her burdens with me.

“I would like the doctors, nurses, and those who regularly prepare

medicinal herbs to help over there. We don't have enough pharmacists. We need an expert to manage the amateur volunteers, or else we can't give them permission to administer the cure."

The cure was being distributed among the sick, so it made sense to keep it under strict control. Unquestionably, priority was placed on doctors, nurses, and medicinal herbs.

Damn it, I thought while clenching my teeth as she pointed at the map. We couldn't afford any mistakes here.

I instructed my own subordinates, whom I had brought from the mansion, to reorganize the surroundings and to ring the small bell in front of the exposed hut. It was probably located there so the noise stood out amid the hustle and bustle and confusion in the town.

One of the officials looked bewildered by my instruction to ring the bell, but Lady Elianna nodded, and a clear sound resounded in the midwinter sunrise. Once I had the attention of everyone around, I raised my voice and spoke in a tone I had never used before, whether in high society or even at my own office—one that meant I had something important to convey.

"I am Alexei Strasser, assistant to Lady Elianna Bernstein. The rescue team that just arrived consists of twenty doctors and nurses. I've also brought with me relief supplies, food, medicinal herbs, clothing, other daily necessities, firewood, and heat stones, which will last a total of three days."

I paused, then added, "As the number of people here have increased, the supplies will decrease quickly, but further provisions and personnel should arrive later. Additional officers wear royal armbands. Please be careful not to disturb the chain of command. And...please deliver information to me, Alexei, when Lady Elianna is at rest. Thank you all."

When I bowed my head lightly at the end, I realized that Lady Elianna, who was standing beside me, was looking at me with astonishment, her eyes wide. My mouth twitched as I wondered why she looked so surprised. It was true that I had never before bowed my head and asked a subordinate or a member of a class lower than mine to do something, but my pride came secondary now.

A powerful voice resounded from the side of Lady Elianna—from the man who was as big as a boulder. "Does that mean that the royal family is extending a helping hand to us even more? Everyone! There aren't many officials here. Make sure to memorize their names and faces. If anyone wicked tries to get in their way, stop them in the name of the Urma miners!"

Cheers of agreement resounded in the morning glow. I'd heard that miners got up very early in the morning because of their job, so it made sense they would be so energized at this hour, but... No, that

wasn't it. The big man's statement seemed to confirm that he would take responsibility, as well as the rest of the miners. There was certainly a desire to let Lady Elianna rest, as she was managing everything all on her own.

How had she managed to subdue these strong men in less than a day? I found myself surprised once again.

"Who does he mean by 'anyone wicked'?" I asked. "I need to make note of anyone who would disrupt the chain of command."

"That's..." Lady Elianna had been articulate until now, but she unexpectedly became hesitant. She then said, "Lord Irvin has been helping us build temporary huts. Um...he told everyone that my life was being targeted, and to please be aware of their surroundings..."

So that was why the rough-and-tumble miners were keeping an eye out around the temporary government office. I asked her a few other questions so I could grasp the situation. She answered them all hesitantly, but I nodded in relief to see that she was acting like her usual self.

"We took a nap in the carriage on the way here. Even Lady Lilia, who was so excited that she couldn't sleep. Well, I forced her to sleep. I have more stamina than you do now. Let's take turns. Please rest for a while."

When I told her that I would run things in her stead, I could see relief flicker in her eyes, but then they filled with resolve once more, as if she was warning herself that she couldn't rest yet.

"No," she began to say, but the big man abruptly threw her over his shoulder. Obviously, that had never been done to her before, and she was rendered speechless for a moment, but she then frantically tried to stop him.

"Raqqa, wait a minute. I just need a bit more time!" she pleaded. She finally got the man who wouldn't listen to her at first to stop, and with a strange look, she asked, "Lord Alexei, what about the closure of the Urma Mines?"

The large man, who looked to be a miner, twitched in response, and the surrounding people, who looked to be officials of the mining town, fell silent.

It had taken Lady Elianna a lot of courage to put it into words, but there was no hesitation in her eyes. I had none either as I answered, "It has been closed."

She nodded, and then the large man said that any further questions could be saved for later. As he silently carried her away, I called out to Lady Elianna again.

"My mother has already received the cure, as well as the other patients in the mansion. And—" I hesitated to say the next part, but I knew that I should, for her own well-being and for the miners who

were protecting her. “One of the perpetrators who attacked us has escaped, along with two others who were wounded. I’m very sorry...” My voice became stiff. “One of them is Jean.”

Even though I was telling her to rest, I had to share that information with her, knowing that it would only burden her heart.

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The morning glow subsided, and the thin sunlight unique to the northern regions spread out across the town. The town had changed over the last ten days or so. The residents of Modzth who had not been involved in the riots must have been watching the situation with bated breath. They realized that there was now a bright sign of hope and slowly started coming outside.

“We don’t have to stop the food distribution for a while, but beware of residents who keep asking for medicine. It is possible that it’s not just for the person themselves or their family.”

I gave instructions at a volume that only the surrounding officials could hear, carefully examined the information that had arrived, and spoke again. At first I was skeptical, thinking that this kind of judgment should be made on-site, but I remembered Lady Elianna’s meticulous response.

She had said, “Perhaps you are wondering whether we should use our own judgment even for trivial responses, but that’s the correct thing to do in this situation. Don’t judge by yourself; ask for insight and instruction from the person in charge, even in trivial matters. Only then will an accurate understanding and prevention of diseases take root.”

I had felt unsuitable for a place like this, and I’d been gnashing my teeth at His Highness’s orders when she had cheerfully told me that.

“Alex! I can tell you’re frowning just by your eyes!”

I suddenly heard an irritating voice. I turned to see that several people on horseback had arrived near the temporary office. They had been investigating the area behind the town, near the entrance of the mine. After the owner of that voice left his horse in the care of the people around him, washed himself, and changed the cloth covering his mouth, he came up to the high ground.

The carefree look in his eyes was not much different from how he had appeared at Earl Ralshen’s estate about ten days ago. His emerald green eyes gave one the impression that they shouldn’t let their guard down with him around. It was Alan Ferrera, the court musician with honey-colored hair.

I relented and responded, “Honestly. It seems like your smart mouth hasn’t changed much.”

“Oh, come on! I always choose my response carefully depending on the situation. When it comes to livening things up with music, I might choose a minuet and trio to outdance and defeat the demon king, or a fiery holy fugue to challenge the ice devil!”

I calmed down when I detected the seriousness in his joking tone, and then a shadow passed over his emerald eyes. I wanted to confirm that he had gone out investigating, so I asked, “What about the residents near the mine’s entrance?”

He shook his head and produced a bundle of papers. I flipped through the pages and read what was written on them. I felt the weight of the numbers and the names. Once Lady Elianna woke up and saw this, it would hurt her gravely. She wouldn’t forget any one of those lives. She would engrave them upon her heart and then move forward.

The Urma Mines and the surrounding areas were closed, due to the hypothesis she had explained earlier. “The Ashen Nightmare stems from a skin disease, and its source is the mines or the surrounding mountains in the northern territory. First of all, there are many caves inside the northern mountain range, and the strata and the environment create a unique layer of air. It has been dealt with from time to time in the mines’ history, but depending on the amount of snow that year, unknown amounts of it were not discharged and therefore accumulated. I believe this is the source of the Ashen Nightmare.”

“Second,” she had continued, “some miners were affected by the Ashen Nightmare and some were not. Why? The Ashen Nightmare isn’t only transmitted through the air. The accumulated source of the disease resides in some ores. Those who pick up those ores get the source on their skin, and it permeates it. I believe that this was the beginning of the infection. Touching the source of the disease and breathing in the air—many people met those two conditions in the mining towns of the Ars Continent’s northern mountains.”

She had then paused for a moment before launching back into her hypothesis.

“And third, the ore that contained the disease became harmless as it touched the surface air. Therefore, the ore became less harmful over time. The same can be said for the air inside the mines.”

“The disease is spread when a carrier touches others,” she had stated. “This could have happened through sharing work tools, touching fruits and vegetables in a market, or even interacting with various things inside the home. For example, the custom of dipping hard bread into soup is unique to northern regions.”

She had then added, “During the first year of the Ashen Nightmare, we had the primary carriers, the secondary infected, the

third, and the fourth. Then it spread explosively throughout the kingdom through merchants and others distributing goods to the various regions. However, despite the enormous death toll that year, the disease is sensitive to heat, so in the second and third years, it weakened. The number of infected people decreased, and when the amount of snowfall became normal, the ore that is the source of the disease became harmless—and no one was infected. Then the following year began as if nothing had happened.”

“That was how the Ashen Nightmare resolved sixteen years ago,” she had said.

The important thing was to stop it in the first year. To that end, we had closed all Sauslind mines, which were the root of the problem, and issued a national proclamation to stop the source of the disease.

As an aide to the crown prince, I didn’t have enough authority to do that. Carl’s authority was limited to the Ralshen Region, and since he was still young and often dismissed as a lord, he could have caused a backlash by doing so. We needed something decisive, like a proclamation from the kingdom issued by the king, so we had used the royal family’s seal, which His Highness had entrusted to Lady Elianna, to shut down the mines located in Ralshen, Azul, Tor, and the Northern Range.

I wondered how much determination it had taken for Lady Elianna to write that proclamation. Even I, who was said to be the crown prince’s right-hand man, hesitated when asked to make decisions on my own. If one overstepped their authority, one might be held accountable—and perhaps even the people around them as well. Yet Lady Elianna had made the decision and taken the plunge in order to put other people’s lives first.

Once again, I admired her sense of judgment, and Alan agreed with me. He’d gushed in admiration, “Lady Elianna is amazing.” His white breath had leaked out from under the red cloth. “We were discussing it in the town of Hersche, and someone asked wouldn’t there be riots elsewhere, just as in Modzth, if we closed down all the mines? And then...”

“Well,” she had said without hesitation, “we’ll establish another industry.”

Apparently she had discussed this with the town’s most influential people based on a map of Sauslind’s northern region.

“The Tor Region will need a large amount of fabric for preventive measures. This thin fabric and weave are unique to their region, so the kingdom will purchase it. As for the Azul Region, it originally had more migrant miners in the winter than mines. They will be rehired as laborers and as distributors. They can provide necessary protection to the merchants now, or help with the transportation of goods. The

manpower is necessary in a closed land with many snowy mountains.”

In addition, she had said that we would pay attention to the characteristics of the neighboring regions and select necessary goods from them. Alan had been impressed by her plan.

“So,” Alan said in an amused tone, “the source of the cure was created from the Milulu Clam. The price of those clams will soar from now on, like the pomelo fruit, but they’ll be widely distributed to the commoners before that happens so that the privileged few don’t hoard them. It’s not because it’s expensive or because it’s used by nobles; it’s because it’s effective.”

Originally, the people of Corba Village had used them in handicrafts and toys. The fact that the residents had not suffered from the disease back then had led to the cure and the preventive measures today. This was something that had come out of the private sector.

“It’s valuable because it’s used by nobles and royalty; I think Lady Elianna knew about that effect. Like with the Suiran weave. But I see that the goal of increasing prices is different now. Not all Milulu Clams can be used as ingredients for the cure, like the ones that are discolored or damaged.”

We had carefully selected the clams that could be used for the cure—those that were unscratched and unspoiled—but the ones that could not be used were becoming overwhelmingly more numerous. What would we do with them?

Alan all of a sudden burst into laughter. He really was lighthearted. “Lady Elianna didn’t waste them. Based on her own hypothesis, she devised preventive measures. Current technology cannot protect from diseases transmissible by air or invisible sources, so in that case, we have to absorb the source of resistance.”

If the color of the clams transferred onto the skin helped one resist the disease, then we could use cloth dyed with that color and breathe the air through it. That’s why she’d suggested everyone cover their mouths with those red cloths. Of course, there had been objections. Wasn’t it reckless? Could such things really build a resistance to illness?

“There are two sources of infection,” Lady Elianna had said. “If it was only transmitted through the air, it wouldn’t have been strange if the entire northern region had been wiped out. But there is another source from which the disease spreads. One of those sources—the mines—will be closed. The first carriers, along with the second and third lines of infected patients, got sick from that source. Then it was probably spread by merchants and migrant workers carrying the disease. In Ralshen, it had been carried in by merchants who transported ore, and in Azul, it had spread fastest by riverboat. In order to prevent that...”

We couldn't stop the merchants or the workers. Halting labor and distribution of goods could be a matter of life and death in some areas. That was why it was necessary to purify oneself by using heat stones, washing one's hands, and gargling. Eating with bare hands, dipping hard bread in soup, eating meat with bones, and ingesting food in other various ways were absolutely prohibited. We gave the townspeople a detailed example of how to properly eat and drink. Furthermore, we ensured that in places where people gathered, there was regular ventilation and steaming.

In this way, we would keep the source of the disease from the mining towns and prevent the second and third waves of infected people. We would spread the knowledge. "We will eradicate this illness in a year!" Lady Elianna had said.

Alan's voice was so pleasant that it almost sounded like he was about to sing, but even he restrained himself in this situation.

"Even though Lady Elianna said this, the Milulu Clams and the protective cloth were overwhelmingly lacking, but then—" He started laughing uncontrollably. "For some reason, we received the Milulu Clams from the Tor Region, along with various other necessary supplies and medicinal herbs. I thought that maybe she had a magic wand stashed nearby."

"I see," I said as I recalled an exchange from nearly a month ago. "From the Bernstein family?"

"Yeah," Alan replied, nodding and chuckling. At first he'd thought that it might have come from the royal family's Shadows and that the supplies had arrived upon order of the prince. Many of the items had been hidden among other supplies in order to finally enter the town of Modzth. They had planned to change horses on the way and make the trip all in one go.

At that time, Lady Elianna had again said to the man who was undertaking the arrangement of various supplies, "Thank you. May I ask your name?"

"Of course," Alan continued, "I was so careless that I hadn't heard this person's name. Then they..."

Alan said that the man who had guided them to Dr. Hester's house and had quietly been undertaking miscellaneous chores had introduced himself as Dan Edold. Dan had said, "We were sent to this land by order of the head of the Bernstein family. If there's anything you need, anything at all, please let me know, Bibliophile Princess, whether it be information or supplies. We'll get you whatever you need."

Alan said he'd seen respect and loyalty toward the marquess's daughter in his eyes. Lady Elianna had, of course, been surprised, but Alan had been even more shocked.

“Dan Edold is the name of a guy who writes travel logs no one reads. Maybe it’s not his actual name, but a pen name for the Bernstein clan,” Alan posited.

Ah, I see, I thought. I had read those travel logs before and invited the author to join the Intelligence Department at the royal palace, but he had refused. At that time, I had surmised that it was actually the Bernstein family publishing travel logs that did not sell well.

Considering this delivery of various supplies, I decided there must be people working for or belonging to the Bernstein family in various places, and they had cooperated with the family to arrange the shipment. I thought that was the most likely explanation.

I could hear the bitterness in my voice as I said, “The family’s motivation is really belated. Hiding their abilities like that is nothing more than a waste of time and resources. What good is there in doing such a thing?”

Alan’s answer was as breezy as usual. “Yeah, well...” he said with a shrug. “Everyone has their own different set of values. The Bernstein family isn’t necessarily hiding it on purpose, but perhaps valuing something else more.”

And isn’t that what leads to this duplicity? Alan’s words prompted me to reflect on myself again. I certainly valued abilities above all else. Therefore, I got angry at those who had the ability but hid and wasted it. Still, people who had special talents didn’t necessarily share my values.

“It’s beyond my control...” I let out a sigh, trying to get rid of the anger inside me, but at the same time, I felt like I had touched upon something. “Nonetheless, not making use of one’s talent...” I felt stuck.

Alan let out a sigh. “Listen,” he muttered, sounding exhausted, and I realized that he too needed to rest. “As long as we have a cure, that’ll settle all the riots and wars of our current situation. Maybe I’m being optimistic, but that’s what I thought,” he said in a self-deprecating tone. “But it’s not that simple, right? Administering medicine to a sick person who is currently suffering does not guarantee that everyone will be cured. There are lots of people who are too far gone, and the treatment would come too late.”

In his words was the weight of witnessing this situation and the lives that had been lost. We didn’t know those people’s names, their eyes, their voices when they were alive and well, or their history. The only thing we could see were the people who had died due to the Ashen Nightmare.

In an instant, Alan added, “But if this cure hadn’t been developed, nothing would ever change. That’s a fact.” He was being sincere, hiding his usual mirth.

“But that’s not enough,” he continued. “Medicine can only do so

much. It can't raise people from the dead. There may even be more riots for the cure. But to prevent that from happening, First, Lady Elianna looked at people's lifestyles and asked herself, 'What do they need to survive right now, and beyond?' I thought she was an idealist. A world where no one died was a utopia, a world that doesn't exist anywhere. But at the same time, she's a realist."

Lady Elianna had come up with the preventative measure of using the Tor cloth dyed with the Milulu Clams. She had also figured that people would start to sell fakes. All one had to do was dye cloth red, after all. If someone didn't know any better, they would be tempted by the name of the product and buy it, regardless of the price. All the merchant had to do was say that it had been effective in the mining towns. On the other hand, it could also be a factor in the spread of infection, like with the dried pomelo fruit.

"That's why she thought about countermeasures and took action," Alan explained. "She understands both the good and bad intentions of the people she wants to save. The good and bad sides to people—the parts that can't be helped, and the parts that make them lovable."

"Lord Alexei!" A girl ran up to me in the morning sunshine. She was so angry she looked as red as the cloth that covered her mouth. "Who is that huge man? When I went to check on Miss Eli, he sat in front of the door of the inn and wouldn't move a bit, not even when I told him I was Miss Eli's relative! He said I was too loud and told me to go away! What is his problem?!"

Alan snickered. "Do you know who that man really is?" he asked.

When I told him no, Alan informed me of his identity, and I couldn't help but feel stunned.

"Raqqarkto?" I asked. "The ringleader of the riot? That's just not possible! Someone who spoke out against his lord and liege would be tossed into a jail cell, not made a bodyguard to someone so important!"

"Lady Elianna didn't exactly ask him to do that," Alan said, looking with amusement at the official who was currently trying to soothe Lady Lilia. "We were skeptical of him at first too."

It sounded like a bit of an excuse to me, personally, but apparently Lady Elianna had said that arresting him would be a waste of time and that she wanted more manpower to help in the town. She didn't want people to flee in fear of punishment, and she would be willing to vouch for the decision. Most likely the people had agreed to it not because they wanted to lighten their punishment but because they wanted to help their own town.

"Did Lady Elianna know that?" I asked.

The measures the rioters had taken were in no way acceptable. If we tolerated their behavior, it might lead to a collapse of law and

order. However, Lady Elianna understood the sentiments behind their actions, and this was the result. As an official of the royal palace, I could only sigh bitterly. Even if I had come to settle the riot, I wasn't sure it would have turned out like this.

"Lady Elianna even got the criminals on her side," Alan noted. "It doesn't matter what kind of person you are. Miss Elianna will love you just as much as she loves books."

Even if she got yelled at, blamed, or criticized—even though there were people out to harm her—she had come up with these preventative measures to help the citizens. And even though she could have done it for her own personal gain, she hadn't. She loved people because she believed that everyone had their own beliefs and motivations; sometimes they were driven by instinct to act for something other than themselves, whether they had malicious intent or went down a criminal path.

"He he. You know," Alan said, sounding close to tears, "until I met Prince Chris, I was an orphan who did criminal things in the port town, and I also crossed dangerous bridges such as pickpocketing and fraud. I only thought about surviving in the short term. I didn't even think about the future. Prince Chris asked me to serve him and atone for my sins, and he took me in."

What was reflected in Alan's eyes was not the town of Modzth, but the other side of the port town where he grew up. He might have been comparing himself to the people here who had committed crimes.

"Jean said, 'No one really wants to give up.' I remembered that I was like that too. No matter what kind of environment or situation a person is in, they want to think about tomorrow and the day after. They want to think about the future. They want to dream about what they'll be doing a decade from now."

I sighed as I looked into his eyes. "His Highness and Lady Elianna are not the only ones who stimulate your curiosity."

"Of course," Alan replied, but I wondered how much he understood. His tone was carefree again, as if he could see the bright future even in this current situation. "Before Sauslind's royal palace becomes the demon lord's castle, we must send the hero."

I didn't understand and furrowed my brow, but I could see Alan's expression through the cloth that covered half of his face. It was very calm and cheerful, like the rays of the sun peeking through on a cloudy day.

"You know," he said in a singsong, "I want to follow those two. Because with them, even a person like me can find a place where I belong, and a future. So Alex..." The light that dwelled in his eyes was like buds sprouting in a dark, closed room—an unknown shadow beneath a soft green cover, showing its face. "No matter what, Lady

Elianna needs to go home to be beside Prince Chris.”

Those were the words of someone who had thought about the future from the current situation to the next step and beyond. I sighed again, my mouth lifting at the sight of those perceptive emerald green eyes. I didn't need anyone to tell me I was smiling. I could feel it beneath the cloth that covered my face.

Chapter 9: Signs of a Counterattack

I had a bad feeling. Something felt off from the very start, and a cold sweat ran down my neck because of the unusual presence at the senior ministers council. I, Glen Eisenach, who was in charge of the crown prince's imperial guard, tried not to show my emotions.

We were in the central part of Sauslind's royal palace, at a meeting where the king and his senior ministers decided the country's most important matters. However, because the king was ill, the young crown prince had temporarily taken the throne to handle the national crisis. As I looked at his back, I felt choked with panic, but I didn't dare show it. Instead, I just clenched my fists.

The reason behind my panic was that the person present was linked to Duke Odin, who belonged to the conservative faction, and to Earl Brandt.

"Are you aware of the current situation, Prince Christopher?" Earl Brandt questioned.

Instead of hearing a heaviness in his words, I heard an undeniable sense of superiority. Chris didn't need to be told that he was the prince and therefore the sole person responsible for the national crisis at hand. Of course he was aware of the current situation. Besides, it was only natural that I was suspicious and defensive when Earl Brandt, who was officially on the side of the crown prince but possibly giving his allegiance to someone else, said something.

It was a fact that the Ashen Nightmare, a deadly disease that had plagued the kingdom years ago, was spreading among the royal capital, among neighboring territories, and among the people. The circumstances had changed in a short period of time, and the numbers were growing each day. The number of people speaking out against the king, calling for help and voicing their anxiety about the situation were also increasing day by day. They begged to know what would happen to them in the future.

"The fact that His Majesty has collapsed has been concealed, but I can't stop people from talking about it. With the spread of the disease, it is natural for people to become anxious. After all, our young crown prince is unmarried and single," Earl Brandt continued.

I see. I could sense the direction this was going and clenched my fists again. Recently, I felt like that was all I'd been doing during the senior ministers councils.

Earl Brandt earnestly complained about the situation in the royal capital, concerned with what the people were looking for. Of course, he wasn't the only one championing this platform. The pro-war faction objected to Chris's countermeasures, and the conservatives objected to the pro-war faction, and sometimes the senior ministers council was only an exchange between opposing factions. It seemed to be a place to refute each other's claims—and to leave those suffering from the disease behind.

No matter how prosperous the kingdom might seem, perhaps this was the true state of its affairs. Unfortunately, Earl Brandt's mere presence always made me feel pessimistic about the whole world.

Everyone in the room was taken aback by what the earl had said. It was then I realized that the crown prince, who was on the throne, had not said a single word since the meeting began. He truly looked like a king making deliberations.

"Let's organize the agenda," Chris said, his voice filling the room. Normally, a neutral prime minister should have said that, but the prime minister remained silent. "Anxiety is spreading among the people. First, we must talk about the disease. We are taking every possible measure against it. We must stop the infection from spreading by prescribing medicine to slow the progression of symptoms for those infected."

He then glared at the senior ministers, who had repeatedly argued without making progress.

"From the very beginning, I sent out orders to put on the agenda any treatment that might be beneficial in slowing the disease. In spite of that, the proposals came from each government office and the people on the ground. What are the ministers, who are supposed to be in charge of each department, doing?"

Even those who were engrossed in their arguments with each other suddenly fell silent.

"Second," Chris said, sounding even more merciless and harsh than usual. "Another source of anxiety for the people is a war with Maldura. Who spread word that that was even on the table? Shouldn't we find out who started these rumors?"

The aggressive actions by a certain group of people, the possibility of war, anxiety about the future, a standoff between Maldura's army and the Edea Domain—people were trying to further act upon these rumors.

Due to the prince's implied suggestion, some of the members of the pro-war faction went quiet. At the moment, the crown prince had the power to make decisions for the country, and he'd clearly stated that he would not go to war and given his reasons for that decision, so those who still called for war weren't considering the kingdom, only

their own selfish gains.

Chris was about to say his third point when someone quietly raised his hand, asking to speak. It must have been very important, because this person was known as someone who seldom spoke except concerning major issues at central meetings. It was Chris's uncle, Duke Odin, the most prominent member of the conservative faction. Chris sent him a sharp glare from the throne, but he nodded his assent. When the duke spoke next, it was obvious he was not close to the prince.

"Prince Christopher, I wonder how things would change if we replace the foundations. How did the military's people come to have such an aggressive stance? It must have started with the reception of Maldura's delegation. The arrival of Maldura caused tension and anxiety among the people. Who was the cause of that? Doesn't it seem fair to pursue that?"

Maldura had historically been our kingdom's enemy, so the duke was implying that the current tension had all started when they came to Sauslind.

You fool! I thought, barely swallowing the words as they threatened to come out. The purpose of Maldura's visit was to deal with and find a cure for the Ashen Nightmare, which was spreading across their land. Historically, they had been our enemy, so I could understand why that would trouble our people, but it was nothing more than background information. The Ashen Nightmare was the largest plague in history, and the country that had suffered the most damage and had come to seek relief from it would be a perfect target to blame for this. What's more, the pro-war faction, which acted selfishly, was trying to place the blame on Lady Elianna. What was their true goal?

"Even if the crown prince's fiancée is to take responsibility," said one of the conservatives, "she has been missing for fourteen or fifteen days. And the fact that there has been so little news is..." He paused before adding, "Ah, excuse me," and trailing off politely. He was directing this toward Marquess Bernstein, the father of the crown prince's fiancée, who was sitting there silently.

After the news had come in, hope for Lady Elianna's survival had become bleak. Even the country's hero, General Bakula, had passed away. The voices asking after the marquess's daughter had already died down. Moreover, the recent trend had been to impose the responsibility of Lady Elianna onto her father, Marquess Bernstein. Of course, the conservatives and the pro-war faction had followed suit.

I clenched my fists so hard I drew blood, but I knew very well that this action was meaningless. The state of things were bad in the royal capital, the world, and this room. And that bleakness had been

gathering strength ever since they had received the news about Lady Elianna.

Damn it. I glared at Chris's back when he didn't react. What are you doing, Chris? Isn't there anything else you can do? Are you just going to let yourself be overpowered by Duke Odin and be nothing more than a puppet king? Is that the future you envisioned for this kingdom? I don't think so. Not you.

I knew that I was putting unreasonable demands and expectations on Chris. I knew he was backed into a corner right now. He had to deal with daily countermeasure meetings and constant conflict with the conservatives such as Duke Odin, and he had to pay close attention to the pro-war faction's movements, wondering if they were going to harm the delegation from Maldura. Chris faced everything without running away, but even though he was an exceptional prince, everyone had their limits, so these thoughts were nothing but an extra burden on Chris. Still...

"Your Highness," called Earl Brandt of Duke Odin's faction. "I would like to make a proposal."

His bold demeanor was admirable, but the way he glanced at Marquess Bernstein with such obvious superiority showed his true character.

"Please give up, Your Highness. This is what the kingdom faces now. What are people looking for at this time? Please forgive my impertinence, but people need hope. Someone they can believe in who will lead them toward the future of Sauslind. You are the symbol of that."

For the first time, I could see Chris's shoulder twitching, although I couldn't see his face from here. Earl Brandt noticed it too, and a smile came to his face.

In a firm voice, the earl said, "I would like to recommend Lady Pharmia Odin, the daughter of Duke Odin, as the crown princess, as the first heir to the throne of the Kingdom of Sauslind, and as the wife of His Highness, Prince Christopher."

A whisper of bewilderment ran through the room. He was recommending they skip the engagement and head straight to marriage?

"Since the outbreak of this disease, Lady Pharmia has become well-known for her good deeds in various places such as the Hero King's temple in the royal capital where the sick have gathered, the hospitals, and so on. In the midst of this national crisis, she has become known to the people as the Lady Saint and has received much praise and support. I am sure there will be no objections if she becomes the crown princess. But above all..."

Earl Brandt paused dramatically and exchanged glances with

Chris. Everyone in the room knew the implied meaning behind it.

Slowly, all eyes gathered on the unusual attendee. Next to Duke Odin was a woman not ordinarily seen at the senior ministers council. It was not Queen Henrietta or Lady Elianna, the crown prince's fiancée who had a record of attendance. It was the woman who was rumored to have inherited the blood of the future king.

A quiet woman, Lady Pharmia, Duke Odin's daughter, had reddish blond hair and a beauty mark beneath her eye. Word had spread about her throughout the royal capital and the neighboring territories because of her saintlike behavior and lack of fear toward the disease. She had charitably distributed a source of prevention, the pomelo fruit, free of charge. Above all else, though, rumors had spread that she was carrying the future king's child. But why?

"As I said at the beginning, Your Highness, what do people want now? Even though it is provisional, you still sit on the throne of the king, so is it not your role to give the people what they want?"

The reason the rumor about Pharmia being with child had spread so far among the people was that everyone was betting on the existence of the next generation—a symbol of hope in this dark world. The one most appropriate to give that to them was the crown prince, who had been entrusted with the future of this kingdom, and the woman who stood beside him. The child born between them would be considered a symbol of hope given to the world.

The people's anxieties and dissatisfaction were increasing, and the nobles and royals feared that it would only be a matter of time until that reached a boiling point. Before that happened, shouldn't we do whatever was in our power?

There was a grain of truth in Earl Brandt's words. It certainly would be one way to ease the people's worries, at least momentarily, but it was a stopgap. I understood why Lady Pharmia was here. The crowning and reception of the crown princess could be done after the disease subsided, and now that His Majesty had collapsed, everyone needed someone solid to rely on. But was that really the truth? Would it really alleviate people's worries?

"Your Highness. Your decision, please." Earl Brandt sounded as if he were giving out a final sentence, and I realized that the prime minister near Chris had let out a sigh. There was nothing left to do but make a decision.

I opened my mouth without thinking, even though as one of the imperial guards, I was not allowed to speak. But for a split second, I saw it. Next to Duke Odin, I saw the look in Lady Pharmia's unmoving eyes suddenly change. It was a proud, strong-willed look.

I couldn't believe my eyes, and just as anger rose within me, the prime minister stood up, taking the stance he usually took when he

sought a resolution of the agenda. “Well?” he said. I saw Chris clench his hands so hard that I nearly lost my balance. I was not allowed to move except for in the case of an emergency, but I took a big step forward.

Just then, I heard something outside the door—a confused commotion as if people were arguing. I instantly braced myself for battle and got ready to draw my sword at any moment. I made eye contact with several other guards, who did the same.

Just then, a soldier rushed inside the room. No, not a soldier, but an urgent emissary with a coat of arms tattooed with henna on one hand. He hadn’t even changed from his traveling clothes. He must have been running all the way through the snow, because he smelled of the outdoors and looked slightly dirty, which was quite unsuitable for a place where distinguished guests gathered. Nevertheless, his eyes and face were filled with a strong resolve.

“Please forgive my rudeness, but I come with an urgent message from Lord Alexei Strasser in the Ralshen Region to His Highness, Prince Christopher. I have three reports. First, regarding Modzth at the foot of the Urma mountain in the Ralshen Region. The riot that happened the other day has been dissolved, and the blockade has been lifted!”

Contrary to the urgency in the messenger’s voice, the tension in the air eased off. It was as if everyone was thinking, “*Oh, is that all?*” However, the mood in the room changed drastically with the next bit of news.

“Second, a cure for the Ashen Nightmare has been found and created! Clinical trials have confirmed its effectiveness, and it has already been administered to patients in the Ralshen Region!”

Every single senior minister gasped in surprise. The Ashen Nightmare was a deadly disease and the main source of the people’s uneasiness.

“Third!” the messenger continued, loudly talking over the murmurs in the room. He sounded even more excited than before. Everyone present stared at him expectantly and listened. He then shared a message of truth, filled with hope.

“I will announce the name of the person who quelled the riots, discovered and created the cure for the disease, and arranged the administration of it. It is the fiancée of the crown prince, Lady Elianna Bernstein. She has been confirmed alive and well!”

“Oh!” Cheers rose from the imperial guards, despite their self-restraint, and from some of the senior retainers who supported Lady Elianna. I clenched my fists in excitement—this time, not out of anger or frustration, but with pure joy and excitement.

Because of this, I overlooked Chris for a few moments, but then I

saw it—the absolute presence of a king that had been rejuvenated in an instant. I could tell just by looking at his back that he had his usual fearless and irreverent smile once more.



As I listened to the sound of the crackling fireplace, I suddenly looked up. The room was comfortable and warm due to a luxurious stack of burning logs, and thanks to the ventilation equipment, which was not available in my country, the room was not dimmed by leaking soot.

I could tell all of that even though I couldn't see it. I could distinguish between morning and nighttime by the light that hit my eyelids. Plus, due to my condition, my other senses were much more sensitive than most people's.

This room we were confined to was fully equipped and decorated with bright colors and furnishings and probably reserved for the most honored of guests. Still, I wondered if my soldiers might be receiving a different treatment.

Just then, I heard the sound of someone setting down a tea set with fragrant tea on the table beside me.

"Prince Reglisse."

The woman who spoke, an unremarkable maid from Maldura, was the only remaining attendant from my own country. She quietly picked up my hand and placed it on the handle of the teacup. That was the reason only she had been left behind: she acted as my own hands and feet. However, they didn't know that her presence was the greatest weapon they could have given us.

"Nina, it's about time."

A small smile flashed across her face. "Yes, Your Highness," she replied quietly.

"It seems that both that girl and Rei are doing their best, which is rare."

"Well, of course," she muttered bitterly. "They still have a long way to go."

I quietly laughed to myself. There were guards in the room, so our conversation would of course be overheard and reported. Nevertheless, both the soldiers and those they answered to would probably be perplexed by the fact that there had been nothing to report since we had been incarcerated.

"Hmm. How did that prince know my name?"

I was a prince loved by the gods, and the reason I was called "God's Beloved Prince" was a secret of Maldura.

Nina's hand left mine the moment it touched the teacup. Our conversation ended, but I could tell that she had replied with an amused smile, as if to say, "Who knows?"

I enjoyed the flavor of the tea, which was so different from the

kind back in my own country. I felt the flow of time, understanding that it would be a while before I could taste that tea again.

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I went back to the mansion and, in spite of what the butlers said, rushed into the study and closed the door with my back. Not even a creak sounded as it shut.

That was when I, Duke Odin, finally let out my anger. I overturned a nearby vase, and the contents scattered with a loud crash. The foreign woven tablecloth, all the carefully selected knickknacks—I stomped on all of them, destroying them. I swept my arm across the desk, knocking off everything on top of it.

In the midst of the clatter, I slammed my hands on the heavy oak study desk.

“That...prince...!” I snarled. I had been so close. So very close.

The reputation of the royal capital, the recognition within the royal palace, the approval of the nobles, the accumulation of inescapable issues, and the solidifying of the outer moat—with all of that, I had cornered the clever prince to a point where he could neither escape nor cheat his way out. The only thing I had left to do was make him recognize Pharmia as his fiancée and the crown princess, and then she would be the one who would birth his heir—even if I had to force him. And if I couldn’t do that, I would side with the pro-war faction and just wait until the outbreak of war.

Both the prince and the prime minister had understood my silent intimidation. The prime minister had even almost decided that there was no further action the prince could take. And yet...

“Argh!” Everything had suddenly flipped upside down, just like the objects I had tossed onto the floor. In the blink of an eye, the senior ministers had cried excitedly to hear the news of Lady Elianna’s survival. The room had been abuzz.

“How on earth did she manage to escape?”

“How did a woman quell a riot—and discover a cure for the disease?!”

“This is an incredible discovery! Should we immediately organize a team to pick up the cure and administer it to His Majesty?”

“No. First, let the royal pharmacist confirm it!”

“How can we inform the public, and can we secure inventory?”

The excitement and anticipation in the room was quite different from the reaction of Earl Brandt’s faction. The military personnel also seemed interested in our response, but they turned to the usual opponents to question the cure’s credibility. The dissidents were few, however. Some of the faction members also had families affected by the disease, and some had switched sides because of their own

insecurity. The tide had turned.

I clenched my teeth, my memory flashing back to the past.

Ever since I first saw him, I had a bad feeling—not when he was a baby, but once he began to think and speak for himself. At first, I thought such things were just my imagination and perhaps it would get sorted out through his education. Unfortunately, that prince grew up in the opposite direction of our expectations, so splendidly that it was embarrassing.

Where had I gone wrong?

I had never gotten along with my younger sister Henrietta. Maybe it was just that our personalities clashed because I often put the family's development first while my sister valued individual will. Despite our differences, when she became the queen, I heartily congratulated her. I thought it was just another way our family could grow. Sadly, since the prince was raised according to my sister's way of thinking, nothing went the way I had expected it to go.

My first miscalculation was Elianna Bernstein. It had all started when she had appeared in front of the prince. If that had never happened, the prince might have turned out how I had wanted him to, although there might have been some small deviations along the way. He would have respected the nobility and our country's own interests and become one of the most prominent monarchs of Sauslind Kingdom, a nation that overwhelmed other countries.

I slammed my hands on the oak desk once again, wondering how I could turn this situation around. I couldn't take back Elianna meeting the prince, but I might still be able to remedy it. If I could get rid of her, the prince might compromise with me in order to deal with Maldura and coordinate with the military. That was the only option I had left.

Nonetheless, despite my orders, that possibility had disappeared with the appearance of the Ashen Nightmare's cure. As long as they had that, Pharmia's preventative medicine would be useless because it would no longer be necessary, and gone would be the profits for my family and merchants.

I had issued orders that in the unlikely event a cure was discovered, it should be stolen, but the fact that the emissary had come to the prince as he had meant that those I'd ordered to do so had been completely incompetent.

"Watteau..."

There was a vulnerability in the royal family's Shadows that I thought I could exploit, one that had appeared during the previous queen's reign. All I had done was used that vulnerability to my advantage. After all, it was their own fault for leaving it exposed. I was sure that I had chosen someone particularly skilled with a keen

sense of judgment. Had it been my mistake to order nothing less than a report of Elianna Bernstein's death?

No, I thought, reflecting on my own actions.

The prince had been visibly listless since the news of General Bakula's death and his fiancée's disappearance. He had remained silent without objecting to Pharmia's requests. As expected, he must have reached the limit of mental and physical fatigue. But right now, even the trivial things made me nervous, even though it was such an important time! Only my pride as a great aristocrat of Sauslind made me refrain from cursing.

"I still have options."

Should I spread false information about the cure? I could say that it was fake and that it was causing people's deaths, which would shame the name of Elianna Bernstein. No. The information delivered to the royal palace was certain. It would only be a matter of time before it spread among the people.

"Or maybe not," I murmured as I gathered my thoughts. This battle was now... "All about time..."

That's right. My thoughts came together. Everything had been flipped upside down, but why? Because there was a key—a trump card that had overturned everything. And if I could get my hands on it, I would be able to win. It was...

Two people were behind this outcome, both still in Ralshen. And this was the prince we were talking about. It was very possible that he already had the cure but had refrained from divulging it because it was the greatest weapon they had for Elianna to regain her position as his fiancée—in order to regain the support base that Pharmia had taken away. But the only thing that mattered was who had it in the end.

"That's it." A joy rose up inside me that I hadn't felt in a very long time.

That was what made this curtain closing so wonderful. My daughter, Pharmia, would go down in history as a saint of the kingdom and as Crown Prince Christopher's only wife.

While I let the joy well up in my heart, half of my head was coming up with instructions. I was making arrangements to conceal my existence completely, as I always did. Time would determine victory or defeat.

The troublesome prince would lose for not accepting his plight at this point. This time, his arrogance would be the death of the person most important to him.

I felt driven by a sense of joy that very much resembled enmity.

The early afternoon was accompanied by its usual hustle and bustle. Lively voices rang from the wild sailors and the boys who ran around them doing chores to earn pocket money. The sea breeze and the gulls' calls were so calming that it felt like the commotion of the day before had never happened.

Kelk Harbor, the western gateway into Sauslind, was very active even in winter. In the midst of all the commotion, a woman getting off a merchant ship from another country caught my attention. She wore a dark overcoat to hide her appearance, but she could not hide her radiant aura. Sure enough, several people swarmed around her like flies.

The flies tried to make passes at her in the secluded back alley of the harbor town, and she felled them with her splendid martial arts skills as if she were clearing cobwebs from the ceiling. The scene made me burst out laughing, even though I should have been hiding there in the shadows. *I'd expect nothing less from her.*

"Miseral's famous female knight. So skilled she doesn't even give a man the chance to help."

She turned and directed a cold gaze my way from beneath her cloak as we appeared from the corner of the back alleyway.

I raised both hands with a wry smile on my face. "It's shameful for a man not to help a woman in danger. I sincerely apologize." I then slightly lifted the hood pulled over her eyes. "But then again, you don't seem to need my help...Elen."

She responded with a faint click of the tongue, which only made me smile more.

"I'm sorry. I didn't expect you to come alone, or for you to get approached so quickly. I'll be more careful in the future."

One of the guards returned and reported that there was nothing amiss in the area. I nodded and urged the female knight to come with me.

I paid for a room at an inn near the bawdy harbor town's main street, and we both took off our overcoats. I saw before me a woman with glossy black hair tied in a ponytail, a flawless body, and a beautiful face. She was probably in her midtwenties. Her dark green eyes still regarded me with a piercing coldness.

With a wry smile, I nodded to the table and sat down. I quietly sipped the fragrant tea my guard served me, but she still didn't speak a word. I couldn't help but laugh.

"You're still so serious, just like you were that other time. Although, back then, you were like a cat whose hair stood on end."

She finally responded with a charming smile and a cool gaze when I brought up that old tale.

"Back then, if you had pet that cat on a whim and it had scratched

you, you wouldn't have thought it hurt even a bit. So if it left such an impression on your memories, are you sure it wasn't a different cat?" she asked, an eyebrow raised in amusement.

"All I remember is that I helped a brand-new knight, but what else?" I said meaningfully. Elen's mouth twitched with annoyance.

The first time I met her was when she had just recently been knighted and was on duty. I was a person in a position of status from another kingdom. When I reached my destination, I was met with a ruckus and immediately came to the aid of a female knight who was in the middle of it.

Elen had successfully protected the mother and child she was in charge of, but it must have been difficult for her to accept help from someone else when she was a newly minted knight. When I went to apologize to her, my bad habit had come out. I rather enjoyed teasing serious people.

I fondly remembered her seeming like a startled cat, fur standing on end, but apparently she remembered it differently. With some self-derision, I thought it unfortunate that I could not speak for this familiar raven-haired knight.

Just as I was about to make my next move, her voice took on a different tone. "I didn't know you were coming. Am I correct in thinking that the reason you are here is because you have reliable information that backs our faction and supports the Miseral Dukedom—and Lady Mireille? And does that mean you are someone we can trust to bring that about?"

The maritime dukedom of Miseral was now in turmoil. There was a conflict between the former archduchess, Lady Mireille, who belonged to the former archduke's faction, and the concubine faction, who were relatives of the current archduke. Did I have information that could turn this dispute on its head, and could I be trusted? I knew the reason she had asked me that.

I was the second in line to inherit the throne of Sauslind Kingdom. Anything that stood in the way of me getting the crown was an eyesore, like the first in line to the throne, Chris, and now also the king of Sauslind, who was rumored to have fallen ill. Duke Odin, who shared a bloodline with the queen, was powerful enough to shake the foundation of those two as well. Although I was at the opposite end of the spectrum, I was still connected to him for my own benefit.

That must be what she suspected. And the evidence she wanted was also related to the Miseral Dukedom's interests.

Miseral, which had made a name for itself as a maritime territory, freely conducted its own trade. Of course, one couldn't overlook that it was a threat to national interests, but it was possible that the person who was investigating it had been killed and their death made to look

like an accident. I had those doubts myself.

Therefore, Lady Mireille would not join hands with the Odin family. Plus, there was a possibility that the current archduke's faction was connected to Duke Odin for their own benefit.

Everyone acted in their own interests, so Elen must be wondering if I was too. Her cold, dark-green eyes were still the same as they used to be as they stared straight at me.

The immutable, unshakable, quiet royal archives was a place isolated from troublesome things, and someone stepped out from there and called out to me.

“What do you think, second heir to the throne of Sauslind—His Royal Highness Theodore, uncle of the crown prince?”

I realized that my reflection in her dark-green eyes had lost its color. Instead, it was now deep and dark, as if my true nature, which had been dormant in the depths of the hard earth, had now revealed itself emotionlessly.

Chapter 10: The Place of Dreams

Someone was calling for me in a soft voice. When I dropped my gaze, I saw eyes looking up at me from below my waist. I saw there weren't any ladders or stools nearby, so I put my toe into the gap between shelves and aimed for the top of the shelf. With a quick stretch, I grabbed the book she was looking at.

The child's face, which had little emotion, suddenly brightened. Before handing it to her, I glanced at the title of the book in my hand. *Bloodsucking Creatures and Insects, Volume 2: Give Me Your Blood.*

Involuntarily, I was about to return it to the top shelf, out of reach of the child, but before I could, she reached out and snatched it away from my chest.

"Thank you," she said. "Thank you, Jean."

She said my name.

I was sent to the Bernstein march by order of the organization I belonged to. I thought it was a strange place—a small, rather forgotten land near the eastern border, far from the continental highway and with no major industry. For some reason, the relaxed atmosphere suited me well.

The days were brutal as I followed orders from my boss to uncover and expose the weaknesses of political opponents, secrets hidden by others and told to them. It wasn't just some insipid exchange of lives. But I also had another role here that was very different from the rest: I was the guard of a very small and very odd little girl.

The child's routine was fixed. In the morning, she would study culture and etiquette at the mansion, befitting the young daughter of an aristocratic family. Under normal circumstances, these studies would take most of the day, but this family wasn't as strict as other noble families, because she was allowed many breaks during the morning. The atmosphere between her and her teachers was casual as well.

Then, in the afternoon, the child would go to the library in town, which was even larger than her mansion. It was an old-fashioned building made of robust stone construction that had a sense of history to it. One could see splinters of wood here and there, and it was by no means a majestic building. Even so, this library was a symbol of the small domain, the pride of the fiefdom's inhabitants, with people

coming and going and visiting from far away. I thought it was strange, but it didn't matter.

My daily routine was the same as usual. In the morning, I helped out with various things at the lord's residence, and in the afternoon, I acted as the young lady's guard. That was the easiest of my tasks, because the young lady never left the library. She just stayed there reading until the sun went down and the library closed.

I learned she was called the Bibliophile Princess. Like a bookworm, she clung to books and wouldn't let go. Her obsession was astonishing for a young child, but it also seemed to run in the family. *I guess there are just some people like that in the world*, I thought without any particular emotion. That was the extent of my recognition.

I gradually began to realize that she was strange. There was a series of hauntings in the library, and the child solved them one after the other. For example, there was a painting done by an anonymous painter hanging by the landing of the northeast staircase. It depicted harvest time. Sometimes, skeletal faces appeared on the canvas, and it was said disaster would befall anyone who glimpsed them. The child thought a little about the mystery and solved it.

The person in the painting always looked like a skeleton on rainy days. Light shone in diagonally from the window onto the landing, and small animals would come and go on the trees outside on rainy days, but not when the sun was out. She discovered that the shadows caused by the animals in addition to the kind of paint used by artists in that era created the phenomenon. The residents of the fiefdom were impressed.

Another example occurred at night, when a woman's crying could be heard from the back of the library. There was a crack in the barrel that held the rainwater, and the leaking water ran down and bounced off the wood and metal that had been added to patch it, making a sobbing sound. The noise resounded well at night when there weren't many people around. A musician who was visiting to study the precious sheet music the library owned was impressed by her deduction.

One ghost did not appear at night, but during the day. A girl's spirit would appear in dim light, and if you disrespected a book or made a fuss in the library, it would always appear and curse you. The curse was that whenever you tried to enter the library, she would chase you out and never let you in again. That was a big deal since this place was such a source of pride for the people here. However, there was a cure for this curse. If one offered it sweets, it would let them in again. I thought I'd heard that somewhere else before.

As a final example, stories about monsters that sucked human blood were in vogue at the time. People rapidly traded rumors about

whether these monsters would appear in the library and when. It caused a bit of an uproar among the children, who argued about whether they should chant some sort of dubious spell, carry silver, or wear garlic to repel the creatures.

The girl exterminated the bloodsucking creatures—a large number of leeches that had been inhabiting the swamps in recent years due to the climate—that had been causing damage to livestock such as chickens and pigs in the territory. She discovered the cause of their appearance, an extermination method, countermeasures, and so forth, all by using knowledge she'd gained from books.

And thus her reputation as the Bibliophile Princess only grew. Only I, however, knew about the experiments she conducted to test the extermination methods.

First, she tested for control methods. The children tried to smoke out the creatures, and during the course of the experiment, the lord's mansion overflowed with soot. All the residents had to leave the mansion and sleep in an inn for a while.

Next, she recalled that every creature and insect found certain odors unpleasant. She thought perhaps this type of monster wouldn't like herbal smells, which were also used to exterminate pests in the kitchen. After reading about it in books and learning from the mansion's cook, the child invented a new anti-insect odor. She named it "Sweet-Smelling Lure."

There were certain sweet scents popular with boys for catching insects. She mixed that with something that had an insect-repellent effect. In other words, it had an extremely pungent odor. She was aiming for the creatures to be lured in by the sweet smell, then be overwhelmed by the pungent odor when they reached the trap, but when she actually mixed it together, the odor became so outrageously strong that it was basically a biological weapon.

The child was scolded over this incident, so next she decided to conduct her experiments near the library. This time she succeeded in driving out the people inside the library and the residents nearby.

Hmm, I have a feeling she's going to earn a different nickname soon enough, but I'll pretend not to notice.

She finally discovered how to exterminate the pest through various experiments such as these. Bloodsucking creatures had an aversion to sound waves using water and odors. Combining the two, she exterminated animals that attacked humans at the same time as livestock. Furthermore, as a by-product, she got rid of the bats that roosted in the library.

I would like to say a word as someone who witnessed the truth behind these incidents and who got dragged into them. Just who do you think cleaned up every time?!

My orders were to stay by the child's side and eliminate any threats or dangers around her—and sometimes send information. That should have been it. However, even though I was just protecting her, I'd somehow gotten involved in a strange ghost story based on a painting. I had taken the lives of others without any emotion, and now I was trying to appease ghosts by making offerings to them. It was a strange feeling.

The territory was so calm and inconsequential that one could take a nap without being targeted by anyone. But if I indulged in too many naps, I would end up becoming an outrageous criminal—a thief who stole offerings or a crook who destroyed pest control products. That didn't include all the harmless things that resulted from the child's experiments.

Even though I was wondering how I got into this position, I realized I was happy. I was living a completely different life than I ever had before. I had no idea a place like this existed in the world. Every time I got involved in one wild scheme after the other, I would hear a voice calling me—a voice below my waist, from a line of sight I no longer had. A long time ago, when I was little, I looked up at others like this.

Coming back to my senses, I blinked at the sight of the sparks. What was I looking at now?

During the middle of the day when the blizzard began to blow, I launched a surprise attack. It was our last chance.

"This time..." That was all the wounded man said, all his plans and thoughts now ruined. His words were a murmur that resembled a curse.

"If only we could get rid of her."

It wasn't a bad idea. I would do what he said. It was a sacrifice for him after he had come this far obsessed with one mission. Wasn't that what I'd always done? I'd obediently fulfilled the orders from above, and I was about to make his wish come true now that the end was in sight.

But then came a sound and an impact that knocked me to my senses, followed by a pungent odor. It was the custom of our target to do this, but it was a desperate attack, and she wore a mask to hide her appearance.

Our target confronted us on horseback then jumped down from the horse. She did not run away; she was trying to stop the cavalry.

At that time, I saw that she took something out of her pocket, but she was a powerless girl. No matter what she did, she didn't stand a chance against anyone.

It was then that the shock hit us. Perhaps she'd mixed the smokescreen used in emergencies with another pungent odor? It

smelled familiar—a spice unique to the northern regions that remained unpleasantly on the tongue.

I coughed before I said anything. The irritating odor penetrated my eyes, blurring my vision. This girl had accumulated experience since childhood and created an even more outrageously repellent smell! No, wait... Wasn't the girl choking as well?

The pungent odor was merciless even through a mask, choking our target and us. It was accelerated by the fact that a gusty blizzard wind was blowing.

I couldn't blame myself for yelling, "Are you an idiot, m'lady?!"

The other party, who was coughing and coughing, seemed to have something to say but couldn't put it into words. I couldn't help but feel more and more that she was a complete fool.

Then there was someone else, who had refocused on his target due to my shouting. I realized that he was still bleeding even though his wounds had been tended to. They must have been serious, but so was his will to kill the target. If he didn't succeed, he would have nowhere to go. He was no longer a Royal Shadow. If he didn't produce results, he would no longer have a home.

But what about me?

"Jean," a voice called to me in memory. It was the man who had rescued me from the brink of death in the midst of that filth. That was the only thing I listened to as I followed orders. That was enough for me.

But...

During hot summer afternoons, I frequently had to give water to the child who was so absorbed in books she forgot to drink. I convinced her to read in that cool place that I'd secretly found. And for some reason, other people began to gather, creating a place of relaxation.

In autumn, when there was a lot of fruit, there was always excitement in the air about all the sweets that would come about, like steamed sweet potatoes. We would split chestnuts like it was some kind of game. It was not a particularly fertile land, so sweet things were not that abundant, yet the girl always offered me the sweets first.

In the winter, when the view was completely white, and in the spring, when soft greenery sprouted... The same seasons, the same times, the same events... We shared so many things. Even though the feelings were different, they were irreplaceable.

I moved at the exact same moment my comrade did, probably quicker than the voice in my head calling my name.

“I want Jean back.”

In the Ralshen Region, in an inn room in the town of Modzth, a device was emitting steam using heat stones. A heat stone had been set in a candleholder, and water would periodically drip onto it from a receptacle. I’d come up with this setup; it was one of the precautions against the Ashen Nightmare. It was the loudness of that sound, the hiss of water hitting heat, that made me say those words.

“Lady Elianna,” Mabel said sternly.

Everyone assembled in this room was deeply involved in the matter. Lord Alexei was making an awful face, but Lord Alan, who was beside him, quietly waited for me to continue, albeit with a somewhat trying expression. Lord Alan was the one whom Jean had wounded, and when I watched him take off his sling, I collected my feelings once more.

Mabel, who was by my side, had been the first person to gather in this room. We had discussed matters of the town and Ralshen with the earl and other influential people, setting our sights on detailed points such as policy, countermeasures, and future guarantees. Then the outline was decided. At first, I’d had no intention of leaving until the town had settled down, but when the matter came up, Lord Alexei had convinced me otherwise.

“You should return to the royal capital, Lady Elianna.”

I’d looked back in amazement, meeting Lord Alexei’s unyielding ice-colored eyes and posture.

“You came to this town to quell the riots that broke out in this land. You gave relief to the sick, their families, and their victims.”

“No, but—!” one of the influential people had said. “Please wait! If the fiancée of the crown prince is here, first aid will be extended. Lady Elianna was the one who came up with this hypothesis. If the illness spreads, the discrimination against Ralshen will only get worse, and it will grow more difficult to obtain aid! If Lady Elianna leaves now...”

It had felt like the painful voice was stabbing me in the chest.

“Wouldn’t that be the third time the royal family has abandoned this land?” he’d added.

Carl Ralshen, the young earl who’d belatedly come to the town of Modzth had refuted that claim. “That’s not true. Ralshen was twice abandoned by the royal family, but the Ashen Nightmare occurred again. Lady Elianna stood up for us, even when she heard about the outbreak. Because of her, we found a cure and closed down the mines, which are believed to be the source of the disease. And she did so in the name of the royal family. The rest is up to the people who live here.”

“Besides,” the earl had continued, “we will benefit from Lady

Elianna's return to the royal capital."

I had blinked, wondering what he meant, and he had responded with his usual strong gaze.

"By returning to the royal capital and having your position restored, we anticipate that more support will be given to Ralshen."

That made a lot of sense. They would certainly take me seriously when I told them about what I had experienced in this land. The influential people who had raised their voices earlier had also been looking at each other as if they'd been convinced, saying they agreed.

Raqqa Arkto had spoken next. He had been responsible for causing the riot and was therefore a criminal, but he was also an influential person who could understand the town's situation and gather opinions.

"The town has a lot of support now. I believe we are no longer in a crisis situation. If you keep the princess here, the people in the town will be relieved...but it's not just our town that you want to save."

His gaze could detect the severity of a situation no matter how pleasant it appeared. That had done wonders to assure me about the town's current situation.

"More people in these parts have heard of the Lady Saint than the crown prince's fiancée. Even if you return to the royal capital, it doesn't necessarily mean that you can regain your position. Do you understand that?"

I could stay in Ralshen and work hard for reconstruction. His eyes had been telling me that that was one way to increase my notoriety and trust, but I'd known that wasn't what I was supposed to do.

I had made promises to Grandpa Teddy. One was to find a clue about the disease, which had led me to the discovery and production of the cure. And now was the time to think about what to do next.

What *should* I do?

"Lady Elianna Bernstein." I'd felt my resolve strengthen when I'd heard Raqqa call my name. "Just like you saved our town, now I want you to save the people of other towns. As a citizen of Sauslind, that's what I want from you. If anyone should save the people of this kingdom, it should be you, Lady Elianna."

Earl Ralshen and the other influential people had nodded their heads. "You saved this land. Now it's our turn to support you, even if we can't do much."

It had been more of a boost than anything else—support and trust from a land that was said to have been forsaken by royalty and country. There was nothing more encouraging than that.

Reconfirming my resolution and my promises, I had answered in the affirmative and moved on to the next conversation, which was the discussion I was currently having with Mabel and the others.

We needed to decide the shortest route to return to the royal capital with the smallest number of companions. The escaped assassin might show himself again. We needed enough guards to protect me, but we also had to be discreet. I had to get back to the capital before my assailant came up with a new plan.

Horse-drawn carriages would take too long, so we had no choice but to go on horseback. For that reason, we decided that my female companions wouldn't be coming along. Lilia immediately expressed her dissatisfaction, but Rei silenced her with one merciless sentence: "You'll only get in the way."

Now that that was decided, I announced my intent to find the other assassin who'd gotten away. Mabel was the first to say no.

"You mustn't, Lady Elianna."

We were having this meeting about my return to the capital in a corner of Modzth's town hall. The office, set up in the town square and visible to everyone, was becoming the headquarters, with all the meetings and informal talks mainly being held here. Gathered here were all the members that had come up with the cure back at the inn.

Of course, Lady Gene was absent, because she was still working tirelessly to produce more of the cure. Lord Alexei and Lilia were here in her stead. Mabel was neglecting her duties both as a nurse and as my attendant.

"He destroyed the clues you were looking for and even tried to kill you. No matter what his circumstances were, the actions he took are unforgivable," she said firmly, and then stopped, her voice choked with emotion. I felt myself getting emotional as well. "The moment he betrayed you, he lost his right to live. Doing that to someone he had served for many years means he has about as much loyalty as a slug!"

"Yes," Lord Alan agreed. "If you sprinkle salt on him, he'll melt."

"Mabel..." After this situation, I was once again grateful for the loyalty of those who always stuck by my side.

"But most of all, it's unthinkable! How could he have served you for so many years and not understood your way of thinking? It's just impossible! He's a fool! If anyone should be taken care of first, it's him!"

"Wow," Lord Alan said. "I might help you do that." It seemed he was also angry at Jean.

Lord Alexei sighed at this exchange. He tapped his fingertips on the map that was spread out on the table, and I returned my attention to him. "I understand that you want Jean back, Lady Elianna, but for now, let's proceed with our plans to return you to the capital. We don't have much time."

With those words, everyone switched gears and focused back on the journey. And, after various compromises...

I used a prototype smoke screen, thinking that if Jean and his leader had managed to escape, they might be riding on horseback from Ralshen, aiming for one last chance to target me. And this was also *my* last chance. However, this smoke screen was a little too spicy.

As I fell to the snow while coughing, I saw a blade come straight toward me.

Getting Jean back was my own selfish desire. That was why I had asked Prince Irvin and my companions not to interfere. The owner of the approaching blade had tenacity and a determination to kill me no matter what, rather than murderous intent. I knew that if he succeeded, he would not only take away my life, but also my reunion with His Highness and everything else along with it. But for some reason, I was not afraid.

I heard the sound of metal striking metal—the impact of a sword being knocked away. I fell on my back, buried in the snow, and when I looked up, I saw a shadow blocking my way. But it wasn't one of my companions; I had asked Prince Irvin and the others not to intervene until the last minute. Instead, it was the slender back I had grown so accustomed to seeing in front of me.

“Jean...!”

~.~.~.~

I saw a look of complete surprise beyond the tip of my sword as I blocked his weapon.

“Jean, you bastard!”

It was strange. Wasn't this man more likely than anyone else to predict that I might take this action? And yet he was shocked.

After wondering why, I came up with an idea. Somewhere along the line, this man might have developed a sense of tribalism, thinking that he had no place to return to. In the end, we'd had to give that to ourselves, and I'd followed him to the point of being seriously injured.

Watteau— I almost said the name I'd barely said out loud before, but before I could, he regained consciousness and attempted to slip through the blizzard. I then gasped with a realization. Behind me was a clumsy little girl buried in the snow.

If I lose her...

It wouldn't change anything. Someday, somewhere—maybe even now, somewhere around here—my life would end. It would end like the lives I'd trampled on so long ago. My life was just that, a fragment of a substitute Shadow no one remembered. That was how I lived. But this girl...

I was injured as deeply as Watteau was, and as I twisted around, something hot seeped out of my abdomen. And it didn't stop there.

The girl looked up at me like she did when she had made a mistake.

“Will you come apologize with me?”

“No way.”

“I’ll give you my afternoon snack if you do.”

“All right, fine.”

I thought of those silly conversations we used to have.

After the girl’s older brother went to the royal capital, she used to grab the hem of my clothes on the way home from the library every evening. At first I’d thought that she had little emotion, but then I’d realized she just didn’t show it. She was so sensitive when it came to books, but she seemed to be numb when it came to herself. Even though the harsh words around her hurt, she would read and read until she could forget about it. She was fragile and absentminded, but she cared about other people’s pain.

I had asked her about it one day. I’d said, “I do like sweets, but why do you always give yours to me? Shouldn’t you just give them to the servants’ children or something?”

The girl had blinked and replied, “I give them to you because then I’ll know that you’re eating properly, Jean.”

The girl had noticed. Because of how I grew up, I didn’t like food that had an odor, so I was always hungry. But ever since I’d caught a whiff of the putrid scent coming from that small thing next to me, smells had always tormented me.

Food had smells too. Even though I knew that if I didn’t eat I would die, I just didn’t like eating. At some point, I’d learned how to detach myself from the sensation and eat anyway, but no one else had ever pointed it out. But she...

She was the only person who had ever noticed. And it wasn’t just because it was me. She probably would have noticed it about anyone, and that was all right. Wanting to save someone like me came naturally to her. Even though I couldn’t save that small life, there would be more lives born like that. And she would save them.

With all my strength, I repelled the blow that Watteau thrust out. I was doubled over now, and Watteau, panicking, stood still. Then he targeted the young miss again.

Someone help!

I’d never relied on anyone else before, but I called out for assistance now in my mind. A familiar Shadow—someone else with a veiled presence who also hid his appearance—showed up before me. He fired several shots at Watteau, watched him fall down the cliff, and after killing Watteau’s remaining comrade, disappeared. But before he left, he stared at me with a strong gaze. He was a Royal Shadow, my former colleague.

My breath was short, and my vision was going white. I couldn't react right away because of the sudden relief and pain that hit me.

"Jean!"

I looked at the girl who crawled out of the mound of snow.

The prince of Maldura, his attendant, Alan, and the five Black Wing Knights who were watching the events from a distance didn't move. No one moved except for the girl and the royal family's Shadow.

"Jean! Hang in there!"

It must have been decided beforehand. She must have told them she would take care of it herself and not to intervene. And I was certain the Shadow must have wanted to finish the job he had started before. Had he seen that, at the end, I couldn't bring myself to point my sword at her?

"A-Are you stupid?" I sputtered.

Didn't it occur to you that this could be a trap, my fighting together with Watteau? You may be heavily guarded, but I could slip close to you and thrust a blade into your chest right this second. Everything would end in an instant.

"Jean." She took off her glove and touched my frozen cheek. That must have been something she did unconsciously to check on me.

"Listen to me." Her voice was the same as it always had been, so familiar it made me feel weak. "I'll go with you to apologize."

"Huh?"

"Jean. I'll go with you to apologize for going against someone you didn't want to betray. I know you've got a sweet tooth, and you're the real culprit who secretly swapped the spices in the kitchen for sweet ones. A long time ago, that chef came to the march and made candies shaped like animals. They accidentally got smashed, but I know that you stole the fragments and ate them. I know you ate all the candy and muttered about it. I know you used to snatch warm straw to sleep on for your naps. I know that you hate the cold, and that you always feel sluggish during winter."



What was this, a daily observation journal of my habits? Before I could even be astonished at her words, I felt the warmth from her hand. Or maybe it just felt that way to me.

“Jean, I’ll shoulder the responsibility for everything you’ve done, no matter how bad. Even if you stole food and ran away—it doesn’t matter what kind of person you are. I will apologize for all of it with you. So...”

Tears filled her eyes. In all the years I’d spent with her, no matter how sad or lonely she had been, I’d never seen her shed a tear over anything other than a book.

“Jean, if you’re going to sleep, do it by my side.”

I had a dream, one I didn’t want to wake up from. I was there, in that domain of the passing seasons, during all the days she got me caught up in her various hijinks. She had made me feel. I had been surprised, exasperated, angry...and happy. I’d felt emotions I’d never experienced before.

I’d dreamt alongside her on that warm straw pallet that had soaked up the sun’s rays. As I napped there, sometimes she had read near me. I had been trained to be sensitive to the presence of others, but it hadn’t set me on edge. In fact, I’d felt calm having her near me.

Moments like those were the only time I’d ever believed there could be peace in this world—a world that I, and that little thing that had been next to me, had never experienced. That was the dream I had. It was an afternoon nap that I wished could continue forever. I didn’t want to wake from it. I wanted to go home. I wanted to go home to her voice calling my name. She always woke me by shaking me and calling my name, then dragging me into whatever chaotic situation she’d gotten herself into this time.

She had always followed me everywhere. Even when she discovered I had betrayed her, she still threw herself at me. Maybe it was because it was me. She’d said she would do it no matter what kind of person I was. Even though I’d held her enemies against my chest, she would...

I smiled. I realized I was trying to come up with excuses to make myself accept it, even though the answer was obvious. I could never lay a hand on her, even if it meant defying that person’s orders. I could never turn against those tiny hands that shared their warmth with me or the unsteady voice that called my name.

“Jean...”

No matter what harsh reality awaited me, as long as she would face it with me, I could awaken from my gentle slumber on this cold ground. As long as I trusted in the light, as long as this warmth was waiting for me, I could do it.

I placed my hand over hers to show her that I had awakened, and lowered my gaze. I let out a big sigh that sounded like a yawn, and gave her my usual response.

“You’re really such a fool, m’lady.”

I watched as the frantic expression on her face was replaced with a smile as gentle as the coming of spring.

Chapter 11: A Winter Bug's Dream

“A dreaming insect?!” someone cried in surprise, responding to another lady’s remark.

A group of girls of the same age were assembled at an outdoor garden party—no men allowed—to deepen the friendships between them. Of course, Therese, a friend of mine with strong ties to the royal family, had come up with the idea. Nonetheless, I understood that the real purpose of this gathering was to help introduce a certain lady who was not used to the royal capital’s high society.

The lady in question had translucent platinum hair and dreamy blue-gray eyes. She looked like a little doll, and she was just as emotionless as one. Her name was Elianna Bernstein, and she had just recently become the fiancée of His Highness, Crown Prince Christopher. She didn’t seem particularly accustomed to social circles, yet she wasn’t nervous or intimidated by interacting with people her own age either. Her conversations, on the other hand, were always a bit odd. Therese would occasionally turn her head to the side and laugh, long familiar with Lady Elianna’s nature.

I gave a small sigh, thinking how ill-mannered people could be, and was about to say something when I heard a scream. It came from the nearby trees, where our attendants were assembling a simple canopy so that we would not be exposed to the sun. They had dug into the soil to construct the tent and out came larvae, which made the maids scream.

It was early summer, the time when all the bugs began crawling once the weather grew warm. With a tone of disgust, one young lady said, “I like spring when the social season begins again, but I hate it when insects come out. I hate summer even more.”

Everyone agreed with her. Insects were a woman’s natural enemy, after all.

“Oh, but,” began one of the girls who had been bothering Lady Elianna, “someone has a nickname like a bug—like the subject of everyone’s disgust.”

It occurred to me that the giggling young lady was from a viscount’s family. I had heard that she was not invited to the tea parties hosted by the queen and that she was having a hard time getting invited to banquets held by powerful nobles as well. I supposed that she was here today because the organizer, Therese,

invited guests regardless of class.

As expected, the ladies around her frowned at her remark. I was a little surprised she'd said it, honestly. If it was already difficult for her to get invitations to influential people's gatherings, why would she speak badly of the crown prince's fiancée? Her expression was undeniably full of hate and spite.

Ohhh, I thought.

The crown prince's fiancée was from the Bernstein family, which was not a powerful noble family. To put it bluntly, the house's name had been fairly unknown until she had accepted the prince's proposal. When she had made her debut in the social world, she had been on the same level as the viscount's daughter, but then overnight, Lady Elianna had shot above the clouds.

The viscount's daughter probably didn't want to admit that. Perhaps she'd felt a sense of camaraderie toward Lady Elianna, or perhaps she had looked down on her a little. Which would be better: having a position you yearned for stolen by a person you looked down upon, or by someone who appeared out of nowhere?

The hostess, Therese, was also silent, and the people around her were nervous about what she would do. But just then, Lady Elianna quietly answered, "Insects are generally hated. History is full of major disasters caused by pest damage, insect-spread diseases, and locust plagues. They affect both the crops and the human body. But we wouldn't be here without insects. As Mr. Daniel Lehnbaum said in his book *Dear Insects...*"

She began to talk about the intimate lives of humans and insects. According to her, without insects, the soil in which the main crops grew would be infertile. Without insects, the flowers wouldn't pollinate, and we wouldn't be able to appreciate their beauty in the spring. Flowers also generated demand for perfumes and gifts. And silk, a very expensive cloth from the east, was actually a cocoon made by an insect called a silkworm.

Lady Elianna's expression sank a little, even though she had been animatedly talking about the supply and demand that insects created.

"The other day, I received something very popular in the capital called 'Amber's Love,' which is a sickly sweet— Err, I mean, a sweet treat. It could not be made without honey and bees. First of all, honeybees—"

She started to go off on another tangent but was interrupted by someone exclaiming, "Amber's Love! Oh, I know that!" Then everyone was suddenly excited.

"You have to reserve them!"

"Yes, they have a very limited quantity available!"

"I can never get my hands on one!"

“Oh, you too?!”

“I sent my servant to line up, but even then I couldn’t get a reservation ticket! Ugh!”

Voices of indignation came one after the other. Longing gazes were directed toward Lady Elianna.

“Alas, but I’d expect nothing less from the crown prince’s fiancée.”

They all waited for her to explain, but the answer she gave wasn’t the one they were expecting.

“No, um... There are different types of honey.”

For some reason, when Lady Elianna said that, curiosity on her face, her eyes were fixed on the young lady who had been harassing her.

“The honey harvest is usually in the spring, when the flowers are crowded with bees. According to *Gourmet Food: Fifty Foods and Ingredients You Should Eat Before You Die*, written by a gourmet named Constantine, yellowfin honey, which is only produced in very small quantities in the Anselm Region, is honey that is harvested from trees, not from flowers, and is slightly bitter. It’s also mildly sweet, and even people who don’t like sweets like it. However, there are no beekeepers in that region today, so it’s an incredibly rare ingredient...”

“Wh-What about it?” the viscount’s daughter asked.

Lady Elianna stepped forward, maintaining eye contact with the girl, which was a bit strange, even for her. “I’ve always wanted to try it, Lady Bianca Boltzmann. I’m sorry that I didn’t recognize you right away. Don’t you have relatives in the Boltzmann beekeeping business? There was a travel log by Mr. Dan Edold that said there is a honey that can only be harvested there in early summer, and that is exactly that kind of yellowfin honey!”

With a biting look, Lady Bianca sniffed, “W-Well, I *have* heard of someone like that among my uncle’s side of the family!”

“By all means, tell me more!”

Lady Elianna leaned forward excitedly, but then someone clapped their hands. It was Therese, who gracefully smiled at her guests.

“That’s wonderful,” she said. “Both my mother and grandmother like sweets, but after all, they are women. They care about their figures. If someone could make Amber’s Love with the slightly sweet honey Lady Elianna speaks of, I think it would become that much more popular! And even if that’s not possible, there is no doubt that any confection made with mildly sweet honey will definitely please women!”

A rarity added to an already rare sweet seemed a surefire hit. Women, especially upper-class ones, were vulnerable to words like “scarcity” and “limited quantities.” Amber’s Love would become even more popular if it went hand in hand with the rare honey.

All of a sudden, Lady Bianca had the potential to lead to a new trend. The girls foresaw the future and rushed to form a friendship with her—while also remembering it was popular with Lady Elianna, the crown prince's fiancée. At this rate, I doubted Bianca could continue to bear ill will against Lady Elianna.

I smiled wryly as I witnessed both Therese's hostessing skills and a new trend in the making, but something smoldered in my heart. Therese had put it all together so neatly, but it was because she knew Lady Elianna so well and trusted her. That was why I didn't speak up, but what if it had been me?

If I were in Lady Elianna's position, Therese would surely have drawn attention to herself as soon as possible so I would not be blamed and so I would not be hurt by being forced into an uncomfortable position. That had happened many times in the past. I'd never been successful in the limelight, not compared to Therese anyway. I couldn't do what my father and the people around me wanted.

"That young lady comes from a good bloodline, but she doesn't have much talent." Everyone whispered things like that. My father's reprimands weren't directed at me, but instead he looked at me with no expectations. After that, the teachers I was close with were dismissed, replaced by much stricter ones.

Everything about me was under my father's control—tomorrow and the day after tomorrow and probably every day until the end of my life.

Therese had always been the one to save me when I cried in the shadows in pain. She'd held sleepover parties without my father's knowledge, and she'd taken me around town, to theaters, to garden parties, and on excursions to the countryside. She'd expanded my world and freed my mind. She was always with me when I was scolded. She was my beloved best friend.

"Goodbye!"

The loud voice startled me, and I looked up to see the familiar temple. A maid who was always by my side said, "Lady Pharmia?" and supported me so I wouldn't fall.

There were always three or four maids and three bodyguards around me so that I would not be hurt, physically or mentally. In fact, I had already been told it would be difficult for me to go out, but the reason I continued to go to the temple on a daily basis was that I was teaching myself that there was no going back.

In exchange, my personal affairs became tougher day by day. Some only came to see me because they thought I might be the future crown princess, and some came all the way here after hearing of my

reputation as a saint. Regardless of the reason, they all ended up being disappointed by how unapproachable I was, saying that in the end I was little more than a noble's daughter playing house.

I blinked a few times and regained my composure. The person who had loudly said goodbye was a child bidding farewell to people leaving a simple hut built in front of the Hero King's temple. *Why did that startle me so much?*

As I headed inside the temple, I heard someone asking for salvation, as usual. "Lady Saint!" they called. I stopped by each person and asked them how they were, if they had any problems, and if they needed anything. That was my daily routine. However, the number of people gathered here was clearly decreasing. Their gazes were growing skeptical, and I heard them whispering behind my back. I didn't have to wonder why.

The cure. The whispers had all started then, when the Bibliophile Princess, Elianna Bernstein, the crown prince's fiancée, developed the cure.

She's alive! She'll come save the royal capital with the cure!

The story had quickly spread. I'd thought that everything would be decided at the senior ministers council in the royal palace, but then we received the news that Elianna was alive and that she had a cure for the Ashen Nightmare.

Why? That was the first thought that had popped into my head. And at that moment, I knew that a dark feeling inside of me had taken over my whole body.

I wanted to go to Christopher's side. I wanted him to look at me, to say my name with love. But even though I knew I couldn't do that anymore, I still wanted to go to him, just once. I wanted him to touch me, even if it was purely out of duty. I wanted him to want me, Pharmia Odin. But that wish hadn't come true. Everything I wanted belonged to *her*.

In the past, I'd thought it was inevitable. I didn't have the appearance, charm, or witty conversational skills that attracted people like Therese had. I didn't have the knowledge and curiosity of all things, the desire to help the poor, and the passion to enrich the country like Lady Elianna did. All I had was my bloodline, a general education, my feelings for Christopher, and my father's power. I had tried to convince my father of that once. I'd told him that no matter how hard I tried, I would never be like them. I had told him that only someone better than me could stand by Prince Christopher's side.

Despite their engagement, Lady Elianna rarely appeared in society, and rumors had spread that she was his fiancée in name only. When His Highness showed up at banquets, the former fiancée candidates and their parents immediately flocked to him. From the

outside, His Highness's situation was the same as before the engagement.

I'd never do such a thing. I used to tell myself that in an attempt to convince myself.

And then word of her achievements had gradually spread among the people and the nobility, which led to the dramatic event in early spring. Irene Palcas, a noble's daughter, had gone to the inner palace to learn etiquette. Among Therese and my circle, the perception was that she was being foolish, but it seemed that her mind was made up.

In the end, His Highness's speculations had been proven true and Irene and her father had been swiftly dealt with, but perhaps my father and I had thought the same thing at the time: there were still vulnerabilities to take advantage of in their relationship. Then, finally, the time came.

I pressed my trembling mouth in a firm line. The maid at my side was looking at my face, but if people knew how I felt inside, they would never even think to call me Lady Saint.

Somewhere deep inside of me, I knew that one of my father's men possibly could have killed her. In fact, I had wished for that to happen. I wanted her gone. I wanted her away from Prince Christopher's side!

"Lady Pharmia!"

As I stumbled, the people around me buzzed. The blackness inside me made me feel nauseous. Even though I had been hoping deep down inside my heart that she would disappear, I'd pretended not to see it. But then I realized she was alive, and the moment I found that out, the first thought that popped into my mind was "*Why are you getting in my way?*"

I'd been so close—just one more step to the place I had dreamed of ever since I was a child. It was right within my grasp.

There she was, the girl who had talked about "dreaming insects."

While the ladies around her were shifting the topic to honey-based confections, Therese asked her what she meant, and I was curious too.

"Insects rarely show themselves in winter. I overheard some time ago that some hibernate in groups. I wonder how the insects in the soil know when it's spring."

"Well, insects emerge when the weather becomes warm. Isn't that obvious?" Therese responded.

I braced myself for another academic lecture from Lady Elianna, but her reply surprised me.

She thought for a moment and then murmured, "Perhaps they're dreaming."

"Dreaming? Insects?" Therese asked, sounding surprised.

Lady Elianna nodded and said, “For example, I read an essay stating that cicadas spend seven years in the soil as larvae. For seven years, they wait patiently and intently to awaken—all throughout springs, summers, and cold winters. And then they wake up when the time comes. Maybe they just know when it’s time to live their lives. And...” She turned toward the bright sunshine and looked at the girls chatting nearby. “Maybe they dream about that time, the time when they wake up and emerge, growing their wings.”

Everyone dreamed of the time when they became the main character, yet, involuntarily, my resentment was about to spill out.

Why? Why did you get in my way? This was my time to awaken! I was going to stand next to His Highness as the Saint of Sauslind. Finally, my turn had come!

The people around me panicked as I struggled with nausea that made me dizzy. They panicked because they thought I was carrying the future king’s child.

I wanted to scream, but I somehow managed to hold it back. Everyone around me should have known what the people were whispering now—that I was a false saint and that dried pomelo fruit wasn’t effective against the illness. The words of the hospital staff in the royal capital began to permeate the public.

Now the words circulating around the capital were “the cure” and “the Bibliophile Princess,” even though we had only received the announcement yesterday. It was also proof of how much the people had been waiting for it. All the efforts I had made over days and days to get my name and actions known collapsed in an instant. When one built a castle on the sand, things that had been hardened with lies would crumble right before one’s eyes.

Father was still working on something, trying to get the advantage for me, and I was the one going along with his plans, believing in them and expecting that he would take care of Lady Elianna. I’d chosen this path because I couldn’t give up on my thoughts and dreams despite the circumstances—even though it meant parting ways with my best friend. I was no longer the same person who made mistakes like when I was young. I was not the girl who would stand behind Therese with a smile on her face. I was standing on the pathway that led to the place I’d dreamed about.

I stopped the maids and soldiers around me who were trying to bring the carriage over to this crowded place. “I’m sorry,” I said. “I am all right.”

I caught my breath and tried to quell my nausea as I quietly stood up. I straightened my back as usual and smiled at the people around me as I headed toward the inside of the temple. I heard a smattering

of applause from people who still believed in this false saint.

I took a deep breath and headed to the deepest part of the temple to have an audience with King Karl, but I knew that no matter how much I prayed, there would be no salvation there. Even though I had prepared for that long ago, I couldn't stop the thought that popped into my mind, about the path that I had cast aside. Yet I was still waiting somewhere.

Then a voice of salvation called out to me.

"...mia...!"

~.~.~.~

"Lady Pharmia!"

Panic ran through the crowd. The bodyguards who had secured the surrounding area immediately shouted, "Get the carriage!" I heard someone say, "Open the way!" and there was even more chaos.

In the plaza in front of the temple in Saoura, the royal capital, many temporary huts had been built to shelter the people who could not enter the temple. It was reckless to order a carriage to a place crowded with so many people. I had a feeling they were doing so to prevent other men from touching Lady Pharmia, but as the guards scolded the noisy people, they had a look of violence in their eyes, even though there were sick people who could not move among the crowd.

I, Elianna Bernstein, rose to my feet, trying to stop them, but someone called my name.

It was Irvin Orlanza, who was hiding his appearance. He was also hiding in one of the many huts in the square alongside me. His attendant, Rei, was also disguised and accompanying us.

"But if we don't do something..." Unpleasant feelings would be amplified for both the people and Lady Pharmia.

Prince Irvin said, "Just sit down!" and his forceful attitude told me he would not take no for an answer. "You know the situation, right? Even if you go out now and reveal your true identity, you'll just be giving them exactly what they want. You'll be treated as a criminal who attacked the Lady Saint, the mother of the prince's child. Do you really have the power to overturn that now?"

His words carried the harshness of reality. I arrived at the royal capital last night. Now, I was in disguise and hiding near the temple. If my true identity were revealed here, I didn't know what kind of ugly accusations would be made against me. The most likely possibility was the false accusation that Prince Irvin had mentioned. And I couldn't risk that, because it would go against the prince's strategy.

As I listened to the commotion, I was reminded once more of the

thorn in my side—the “Lady Saint” who had conceived the crown prince’s child.

“Even if Alan were here, I think he would say the same thing,” Irvin whispered.

I thought back to what Lord Alan had said when he had suggested we go our separate ways once we got here.

“Lady Elianna,” he’d began, “when you arrive at the royal capital, you will surely see various things, but I want you to be patient for as long as you can. You were able to manage Modzth, but the royal capital is different. I know you are burning with a sense of justice and duty, and that makes me like you just as much as Chris.”

He had a mischievous smile on his face as he raised a finger as if to make a promise.

“But right now, the most important thing is to have patience.”

I took a deep breath. Even though I was always thinking about the future, I tended to prioritize the events and people I saw immediately before me and would become overwhelmed with my desire to do something about it. But I couldn’t do that at the moment. Even if I tried to deal with this situation, it would only be for my personal satisfaction—a stopgap measure.

Prince Irvin smiled at me as I nodded and got back onto my knees. “If something happened to you here, Jean would hold a grudge that would surge from the bottom of the earth.”

“For the sake of Jean, who watches over us from his grave, we must fulfill our mission,” Rei said solemnly.

“Hey. Don’t kill me yet,” quipped the person who was lying under the awning.

Just as I was about to check on Jean’s condition, the commotion subsided. I could only see from a distance, but it looked like Lady Pharmia had managed to recover and stand up again. I was also relieved to see the encouragement from the people around her.

Actually, Lord Alexei had instructed us to enter the royal palace immediately when we arrived at the royal capital. “Don’t let anyone know about your return. Hide your true identity and enter under His Highness’s protection,” he’d said.

That seemed to be part of His Highness’s plan, but there were things I wanted to do while my identity was still concealed. One was to check on the situation at the temple where the sick were gathered. The capital was equipped with more doctors and researchers familiar with the Ashen Nightmare than Ralshen was. His Highness and I had worked for many years to build the capital up to that point. How would they function with the disease upon us again now? Would a countermeasure unique to the royal capital arise? I wanted to see both with my own eyes and possibly apply them to the Ralshen Region and

other areas. And there was one more thing. I wanted to talk to Lady Pharmia alone.

The situation had reached the point of no return. Even I knew that. But before everything was settled, I wanted to talk to her one more time, just like we had in the days where it was just Lady Therese, Lady Pharmia, and me together. I wanted to talk to her as my friend.

Even if it was a naive idea, I hid myself in the corner of the square in front of the temple to wait for an opportunity, but I was only reminded that it was still a difficult situation.

People calmly whispered outside the square.

“Her guards are panicking.”

“Because the false saint’s mask is peeling off.”

“I never did trust her.”

“It seems only upper-class people can enter the temple.”

“She doesn’t care about those who aren’t nobles because she’s the daughter of a duke. She’s choosing who to give medicine to.”

The words I heard made my heart hurt.

In this kind of situation, the people who bore the brunt of the responsibility would be blamed and criticized no matter what. That was my experience in the town of Modzth. But I’d had the title and position of being the crown prince’s fiancée, and Pharmia was standing up without it.

“No,” Prince Irvin murmured to me as I was deep in thought. “People fawn over someone who gives them things they see as an advantage. Once that’s gone, they turn on them. That’s all it is.”

It was as if he was telling me I was being too unrealistic, even though he’d told me before that I could long for an ideal someday.

With a small smile, I returned to check on Jean’s condition. I was so glad I got Jean back while on the road in the blizzard, but he was also badly injured. At first, I had planned to have the royal family’s Shadows capture him and force him to have a discussion with me, but he’d come back on his own. That was good, but his condition was unstable. We’d spent half a day tending to his wounds and keeping an eye on him, and during that time Lord Alan and the Black Wing Knights had made preparations and taken separate actions.

I had been surprised because I’d thought we were going to the royal capital together, but then Lord Alan had put his finger over his lips as if it were a secret and said, “This is part of His Highness’s strategy.” Then he’d reminded me of our previous promise.

Judging by the appearance of the carriage he’d prepared, I’d thought perhaps he was going to pick someone else up. I’d also thought that it would be safer to entrust Jean to Lord Alan rather than myself, since I was heading to the royal capital on horseback, but Lord

Alan had told me no.

“I don’t think Jean will be able to relax with me either. Besides,” he’d said with a mischievous grin, “I don’t think he wants to leave your side, Lady Elianna. He wouldn’t say so, though, even if he was forced to eat something incredibly spicy.”

After Lord Alan told me that, and upon the advice of the Black Wing Knights, who were used to treating injuries, I had reluctantly begun our march to the capital. On the way, I’d checked on Jean frequently and tried to take breaks, but Jean had insisted that he would rather us hurry and get there instead of drawing out his pain any longer, so I obeyed his wishes and kept running.

“Why am I hearin’ voices I don’t recognize? Are they the people who’ve come to get me?” Jean had mumbled and groaned as Rei carried him on his back, while Prince Irvin and I rode on one horse together.

After taking a little detour, we’d reached the royal capital, but Jean had suddenly collapsed, and I too had been on the verge of passing out due to the prolonged journey on horseback. The inn had been full last night, so we’d rested in a shed, but today my body was stiff with muscle pain, which I had never experienced before. Still, I was having an easier time getting up than Jean was.

“Jean...”

My heart tightened with guilt and anxiety for making him push himself. Even if we called for a doctor, there was still a shortage of them here in the capital. Instinctively, I took his cold hand and said, “Hang in there,” as if praying. “When you recover, I’ll give you all the sweets I get.”

“Oh, you’ll make him your poison taster?” Rei quipped.

Prince Irvin nodded as if that made perfect sense. “So he’ll be in charge of leftover food disposal.”

“Just who do ya think I am?” Jean groaned.

Prince Irvin laughed. “Don’t worry. Your pulse is normal, and you’re conscious. Your strength and stamina will drop if you push yourself too hard, but since you’re such a hardy man, you should be able to move if you rest for two or three more days.”

I breathed out a sigh of relief, but then Prince Irvin changed his tone. “Now, about our plans from here on,” he said, gazing strongly at me. “I’m going to get my brother. I’d like you to help me enter the royal palace.”

My heart skipped a beat. Irvin Orlanza, a prince of Maldura, and Rei, his attendant, had their own reasons for escorting me so far and working together with me. I knew that, but it still made me feel sad and lonely somehow.

I bit my lip. “The royal palace is... I...” Since he was under the

protection of His Highness, Prince Irvin should have been able to move freely within the royal palace, but I hesitated to leave.

"It's fine," he said. "You can't move Jean right now. Besides, no matter what the circumstances, you invited us into the royal palace. The prince has shut us out, but you have your own intermediary, and we'll take it upon ourselves to use it. Let's go with that story."

It was at that moment that I thought Prince Irvin's foresight might be on a par with His Highness's. I was hesitant, but I nodded and switched my thoughts to something else.

An intermediary in the royal palace... The first person that came to mind was Prince Christopher, but the prince was busy focusing on his plan. We couldn't get in his way. The next person I thought about was Glen, a knight of the imperial guard, but protecting His Highness was his most important mission. Prince Theodore was absent. If I contacted my father or brother, my whereabouts might be leaked. Plus, the queen was probably under a strict watch at the moment. Lady Anna, the Storrev family, Nigel, the head of the Royal Palace Pharmacy...

As I went through everyone, I had a flash of inspiration. They were in the royal palace and should be free right now, plus they didn't have much supervision. With a nod, I took out a blank piece of paper from the extra-large book that I always carried around and began writing the request.

Jean glanced at me through barely open eyes. "I've been wonderin' 'bout that for a long time. What is it? That thick book."

"It's a secret," I said as I kept moving my pen. I smiled as I looked down at my secret weapon.

Prince Irvin and Rei were taken aback.

"But it's so heavy. How can you carry that around?"

"With those slender arms... Are you some kind of witch or something?"

I ignored their commentary and finished the letter, then told them how to connect with the intermediary, who I had been in contact with for nearly five years. I knew they would understand the letter and the intent of my request.

When I handed it to Prince Irvin, his expression turned serious. "I'm worried about you not having enough people around to guard you." He glanced around, probably checking the positions of the royal family's Shadows hiding nearby, then ironically glanced over at Jean. I was a little flustered by the tense atmosphere.

The bright sun was rising in the distance. It was time for the doctors, nurses, and helpers to come out of the temple and make their regular rounds. Among them was one person who looked around restlessly. She spotted the red cloth tied on the awning and ran over at

full speed. As soon as she caught sight of me, she started to yell my name, but Rei quickly clamped his hand over her mouth. It was Sarah, a maid who had served under Queen Henrietta but now worked as a servant.

When Lord Alexei had instructed me to enter under His Highness's protection, he'd said to contact Sarah first. However, when we had arrived at the capital and the Shadows had checked in, we had been told that Sarah and other palace servants had been dispatched to help in the temple, so I wanted to see what was going on inside there myself.

"Sarah." I put my finger against my mouth as if to say, "Don't say my name."

Sarah nodded and Rei released her. Nevertheless, while I was watching her, her emotions reached their peak, and she burst into tears.

"You're safe... You're safe!"

People around us buzzed as she collapsed into tears. I hurriedly soothed her and told her that I didn't want to draw attention to myself.

Ever the royal attendant, she calmed down and took a deep breath, but no matter how much she tried to conceal them, her feelings were evident on her face, and I couldn't help but smile. It only confirmed the fact that I didn't make a mistake in contacting her. I lowered my voice and asked her to keep Jean at the temple.

Sarah quickly understood the situation. She was a modest woman and didn't dare say it, but I knew I was in pretty bad shape. Not only was I dressed as a boy, but I had a piece of cloth wrapped around my head to hide my hair, and the clothes I wore to protect against the cold weather were tattered and stained from my long journey here. I certainly didn't look like the daughter of a noble family or the fiancée of the crown prince. I felt embarrassed and unbearably small, being seen like this by Sarah, who was once a subordinate of the queen.

She let out a deep sigh and changed her tone of voice. "What shall I call you?" she asked.

"El," I answered, and she nodded and told me what to do.

"I'll take him in as a patient at the temple. He will be carried in on a stretcher. Only one attendant is allowed. Will you be that person?" She spoke in a firm tone, seemingly burning with a different sense of mission. I nodded and stood up. "The person accompanying him must cleanse themselves and undergo an examination. I will show you inside. You must part ways with the rest of your party here. Is that all right?"

She glanced at Prince Irvin, who nodded with a grin. I bowed to him as he and Rei began to depart.

“Please take care...” I called.

Prince Irvin wanted to save his brother, but those inside the royal palace would be on high alert. No matter how naively one looked at the situation, the possibility that he might cause a commotion was undeniable. I wasn't in a position to let down my guard yet, and I was filled with anxiety.

Prince Irvin gave me a bright smile in return. “I will protect my Flower Protector insect.”

I felt as if I were being caressed by a soft breeze. I blinked absently and rubbed my eyes. I was in the library as usual; I must have dozed off while reading. It was such a happy time, though.

Surrounded by many books, I could hear their breath and feel their pulse. I sensed the unknown worlds of the stories that lay dormant in them, and I yearned for the knowledge and thoughts of many people spelled out in various sentences. Some were realistic, some poetic, some fantastical, and some crazy, but all of them had life.

Stories sometimes transported people to different worlds, to follow the lives of the people who existed there. One could experience their thoughts, their sorrow, their pain... Books were full of stories that captivated the reader and tales that gave one strength. One could always find a story that made them sad or one that made them dream. Books made one feel they were going on an adventure together, the words endlessly expanding the reader's imagination.

There were research books on history and medicine. There were maps, essays, chronicles, travel logs, and the like. There were books on entomology, zoology, and botany. Books on flora, musical scores, art, and so much more. A number of unknown worlds spread out inside a library.

All books contained life inside of them. Was there any greater happiness in this world than being able to sleep in such a place? I wanted to be immersed in this happiness forever, wrapped in a feeling of euphoria, my heart thrumming with excitement.

And yet...

“Huh?”

I blinked. After a moment, I realized I was crying. A wave of emotions hit me before I even knew why.

There were more important things, or at least things as important as books. Some people thought there were things even more irreplaceable than that, but that person was gone. If not for them, I would have been all alone, even surrounded by so many books. I used to think that was fine, but then I had learned how it felt to care for just one person, and experienced the joy that came when the feeling

was mutual. I couldn't go back to the old me, who was happy so long as she had books.

I woke up to someone shaking me. "M'lady?" I blinked through my hazy vision, saw Jean's questioning eyes, and something spilled out—the loneliness of being in a large space. Confused, I rubbed my face and sat up, then noticed a woman sleeping next to me. *Sarah*, I thought, and then the reality of the situation came rushing back to me.

I was in the royal capital, inside the Hero King's temple. Among the several rooms, there was a corner where bunk beds were lined up for those with mild illnesses. Jean was injured, but thanks to Sarah's arrangements, he was able to rest here in the top bunk, and I slept underneath.

Before entering the temple, I had cleansed myself in the bath and put on new clothes that Sarah had prepared for me. They were still boy's clothes, but I'd put them on, got some food in me, and watched over Jean's medical care. I was so relieved that I had collapsed into bed and fallen asleep.

Sarah, a temple official, was lying next to me. I hadn't noticed it at all. I think that the fatigue of the past few days had accumulated, but I was surprised I had slept so soundly considering the current situation.

"It's already night?"

I could tell it was nighttime by the dimness of the hall and the number of people asleep. The fact that the day had come to an end only filled me with frustration.

I took a deep breath and slipped out of bed so as not to wake Sarah, who was fast asleep. After checking on Jean and exchanging whispered conversation, I left the hall with a small handkerchief in hand.

Suddenly, a chill hit my whole body. It told me that it was late at night, and that, paired with the dark corridors that held almost no sign of others, gave me the creeps. I had to rely on the occasional hanging lantern, but I arrived at the water fountain outside, where I wet my handkerchief with cold water and washed my face. I exhaled a puff of white breath in the darkness, and now that my circulation was going again, I finally felt awake. It was time to renew my resolve for what I had to do the next day.

I heard a sound nearby like ice cracking. My heart skipped a beat and I whirled around, backing up at the same time. We had to make sure that I was back in the royal capital yet, especially since I was being targeted.

As I stepped back, I heard a quiet, brooding voice call my name.

“Eli.”

My heart pounded. *No way*, I thought. Meanwhile, I sensed that the owner of the voice was walking out of the shadows, but then heard the night guard patrolling from somewhere nearby. It distracted me for only a split second, then the figure came out of the shadows and grabbed me, trapping me in the darkness.

I was about to scream, but they shushed me. I could hear the person’s heartbeat, and I sensed the patrol was leaving as he shone his lantern here and there. The person who held me captive wrapped me in their cloak and listened for the guard to leave.

I recognized that scent, that voice, and the warmth and size of his hands. His heartbeat sounded different from mine. His frame, his height, and his gestures were familiar. I felt as if I was being wrapped up in him. I recognized it. I remembered it all. My doubts, my anxiety, and my expectations melted as I lifted my head.

It was late at night, and the wind was still and silent. It was freezing, like deep in winter when the piled-up snow turned to ice. Even the faintest breath turned white in the air.

As I strained my eyes in the darkness, the snow fell from a nearby branch, and I could see the thin crescent moon emitting just the slightest glow of moonlight. But that was enough for me to see the blue eyes and golden hair peeking out from his cloak. He wasn’t smiling now, but staring at me with a tense and serious expression.

I tried to speak, but no words would come out. So many thoughts swirled inside of my head. There were so many things I wanted to talk about, things I wanted to convey, things I wanted to confirm—just everything. I didn’t know what to say.

His breath was also white as he exhaled, his expression still tense as he watched me. There was no trace of his confident smile or even the pushiness he sometimes exhibited. It seemed like he was afraid of something.

Just as I thought that, I realized something. He was with me. Even though I had been told to go to the palace, to come under His Highness’s protection, I had avoided that. I’d made excuses about it because I had been afraid to see the prince. I had been holding back my desire to see him so much that when the time came, I was too afraid. Even though I believed in him, and he had supported me so many times, I had lost sight of that voice. I couldn’t see anything, like a traveler caught in a blizzard.

When I had returned to the royal capital, voices had overflowed. They spoke of the crown prince and the Lady Saint, the future crown princess. They mentioned a symbol of the next generation born between the two of them—the hope of Sauslind, who would inherit the venerable bloodline.

Should I have come back here? My thoughts had frightened me. I should have faced those fears, but instead I'd shrunk away from them.

Once again, he breathed white in the darkness, softly calling my name. "Eli..." He sounded frightened in a way I'd never heard from him before.

His hand ghosted my cheek and the hair that spilled from my headwrap. He touched me affectionately, lovingly, like he was checking to see if I was injured. He caressed and stared at me as though he cared, and while I watched him do that, my emotions overflowed.

There were so many words I wanted to convey. It hurt to say them, so I'd kept them in my mind for so long.

"You..."

When my life had been in danger and Grandpa Teddy had forced me to choose whether or not to cancel the engagement, I'd received courage from Prince Christopher's letter, just as I had when I couldn't live up to those expectations. Even though I'd lost sight of him and his feelings, he was always the one person in my heart. His blue eyes and golden hair were etched into my brain.

He was a prince who wished for the kingdom's future, but to me, he was the one irreplaceable person in my life.

"I missed you...Prince Christopher..." I sounded like I was about to burst into tears.

His Highness's eyes wavered, and he murmured, "Eli." He then swept me into his arms. "Elianna..."

He pressed his hot lips on mine as I wrapped my arms around his neck, not wanting to let go of his strength and his passion.

I missed you... I missed you!

That was all I could think. I wanted to return to his side even though I had gone through so much pain and suffering. I wanted to see him just one more time—the person who'd brought me out of the world of books.

The heat of his passionate kiss made it difficult for me to breathe, but at the same time, it showed me how frantic he was. It melted all the ice and thorns that remained inside me, filling me instead with only love.

A passion this strong could overcome anything. I was certain there would be more painful and sad times in the future, but I wanted to support him in those times. I wanted my love for him to help him, even if only a bit. He was that one person no one else could ever match up to. I wanted to protect him, and I would give up anything to do just that.

We embraced each other tightly and kissed passionately for what seemed like an eternity as we expressed our feelings for each other. It

became hard for me to breathe, and he pulled away slightly when I made a quiet noise.

We were so close our breaths mingled, unable to distinguish one from the other. I stared absently at it.

He then whispered, "Eli..." He sounded desperate, so unlike his usual confident self.

He wiped away my tears with his fingertips, then pressed his lips on mine once more. He called my name over and over again, as if savoring the sound of it. Every time he did, it was as if he was saying, "I love you."

He laced his fingers with my hair and kissed me passionately. I struggled to catch my breath, so he pulled away again and, in a languid, hoarse voice, uttered, "Elianna."



That voice invited me to open my eyes. Both of our hearts overflowed with love for each other, a sort of choking pain we were happy to bear. Our gazes conveyed the same thoughts. *I missed you. I never want to leave you again.*

I took another deep breath, knowing that we would have to part for the time being. Irvin's infiltration of the royal palace was likely to cause a ruckus with the military, and the prince still had a lot to do. I was currently in a safe place, so I couldn't be worried about him right now. I was sure that His Highness was finally trying to bring all the culprits to light, even if it was painful for him to do so.

He pulled away from me with a small sigh, but then I kissed him once more, trying to express that no matter what happened, I would be by his side. Our lips overlapped again and again.

Under normal circumstances, this probably would have made me blush. I wouldn't have thought it possible I could act like this, but now that I had distanced myself from the situation, I had discovered something—a sense of possession toward him. I didn't want to hand him over to anyone, not even Lady Pharmia, who was revered as a saint.

Seeing the strength in my eyes, His Highness laughed, a sound so welcome it took my breath away. It seemed like he recognized me as an equal and not just someone to protect and keep enclosed deep in the royal palace. He trusted me, we believed in each other's actions, and we would seize the future we wished to reach.

He stroked my cheek lovingly with one hand as he dropped a kiss on my forehead and whispered, "I promise I'll come back to you...my ladybird."

I hid myself as I watched him disappear, then began trembling as I once again felt the chill in the air. It was so cold, being alone. It was time to go back and rest.

I was taken aback by the confident hum that escaped my lips. I knew that's what he wanted me to feel, and I had been reminded of it many times along the way.

Chapter 12: King of the Temple

I, Duke Odin, tried to restrain myself, but joy welled up inside of me. It was exactly as I thought. I had kept an eye on the prince's movements and gotten my hands on the target I was aiming for.

When I thought about him growing up to be the king, I had no idea it would be like this. I always looked at the big picture, walking on the right path and sometimes making a move that strayed from it—even having to deceive my relatives if necessary. That was what I'd been taught, and the advice had hit me like a bucket of cold water. That was when I realized my mistake.

The prince was reading my hand. I had just learned his actions were only a pretense to make it look like he was cornered. If so, where was the prince's weakness now?

When I thought about it, I realized what the basis of this battle was. It would take three days for a courier to reach the royal capital from the Ralshen Region. The return journey by horse-drawn carriage would take about ten days, or even more if it was a snowier year than usual. I'd thought time was the key to this fight, until a courier had come to the royal palace and I'd learned that she had returned. Up until then, I'd thought all I had to do was to get rid of her by that time.

But that wasn't the case. The prince already knew who he was dealing with. Since the Autumn Hunting Festival, he had been keeping a watchful eye on me when I hadn't made an appearance there.

"I see..."

I felt like all the signs matched, because now the courier had come to the royal palace. I had lost contact with the person in charge. *I see.* My voice was ringing in the back of my throat. The prince was manipulating information, even what was brought to me!

"Ha ha!" Amused laughter filled my bedroom. That was why I had pegged him as the next king. He was the ruler I had dreamed of for Sauslind—no, he would become the ruler of this entire continent!

I could not suppress my elation at this moment. The factions were in a hurry to protect themselves. The implosion had already begun, but those who wanted to leave should leave. We could sort out those who truly remained.

That courier was part of the prince's strategy—a courier that took three days to travel from Ralshen to the capital. But what if his arrival

had been misrepresented? The courier had probably arrived long ago, yet the prince had held off until she had returned to the royal capital!

The timing was so sophisticated. *I see*, I thought again. He wanted to frustrate me so I would act foolishly. A voice seeped out even if I tried to suppress it. It said I had underestimated him, but that made me happy.

“All right, Prince. I accept.”

Those I’d sent to Ralshen had probably been captured. The prince might finally feel like he’d caught our tail, but that was fine. This time, I pretended I was in a panic to test him. Then I would capture his weakness. I would be the one who was one step ahead of the prince.

And now I’d found it. I’d sent one of my men after him when he hid himself and slipped out of the palace. And I found it! The prince’s weakness!

Satisfaction overcame me as I thought back on his expression when I’d told him that. The prince’s weakness had held him back until the end. Or should I say, the prince’s sweetness.

“Let’s make a deal, Your Highness.”

I’d watched his cheek twitch as he stared at me, pale in the face, as if to ask, “What kind of deal?” So I’d decided to also make a concession, to soothe myself since I was in such a rush.

“We will tell the public that the young lady has passed away. In exchange, I will return her to you unharmed. Then you two will go somewhere, far away from the capital, and make your own little dreamworld, however you see fit. But...”

I had stifled my laughter and made sure my voice showed no vulnerabilities. This was my chance.

“Your wife will be Pharmia, and only Pharmia. She will be the mother to your heir. And if you don’t agree to that, then I can’t guarantee *her* safety.”

I inwardly chuckled. *Or, if you don’t mind her being hurt, I won’t guarantee her safety, but I will guarantee her life.*

The prince had risen from his chair with a clatter, and I’d responded with a cultivated smile, because I was proud to be an aristocrat of Sauslind, and I had been taught to be arrogant and to be one step ahead of others at any time.

“Your Highness, two paths lay in front of you. Either live a modest life with that lady or give up everything.”

As I pressed him to make a choice, I’d seen anger and conflict on his face, and—what I’d wanted to see more than anything—the frustration of enduring defeat.

He’d choked out, “Don’t lay a finger on Eli.”

I stifled the joy that welled up inside of me once again as I

thought about our conversation.

“Very well,” I had replied.

I had forced the prince to submit another of his weapons. I would force him to establish Pharmia’s position and future existence.

The prince’s face had been filled with intense indignation that seemed to ask, “How far would you go to steal Elianna’s efforts and achievements?” But the prince had already chosen for her to be unharmed.

I’d told the prince, whose face had been contorted with emotion as he handed something to me to come to the temple the next day so we could pull the curtain on everything in front of the people.

For the first time, I felt affection toward the prince whose face had been dyed with humiliation and frustration, probably because it was his first defeat. Until now, I thought it was abhorrent, but somehow I accepted it, an existence who had the same blood as me. It was the moment when I finally felt my nephew was dear to me.

It was the day of the reveal. The weather was sunny, befitting a day of victory.

When I stepped out of the carriage at the temple, the unpleasant sight before me made me grimace. In front of the temple were people sleeping on the ground, and I had to walk around them!

After glaring at each and every one of the filthy beggars, I followed Pharmia, who was dressed like a saint, and made her clear the way. They must have understood that I was noble from my appearance, presence, and demeanor—from the way I followed Pharmia. The road cleared like a receding tide, and the guards rushed over from near the temple.

“Your Excellency, Duke Odin! What brings you here today?” Their confusion and desire to hold back a senior aristocrat such as myself made me even more uncomfortable. Soldiers would not be enough to stop me.

I glanced at Pharmia and proceeded to the temple. When I stepped inside, I met with an even more unpleasant—no, incomprehensible—sight.

“Are you ready? It’s from the wing holding the mildly ill,” said a man standing nearby.

“Steam disinfection equipment is ready. Patients and attendants will be temporarily moved to this hall,” replied another.

“Okay. Let’s go first in order. Don’t forget to make the patients sterilize themselves with Kenneth’s Herb. Stop the decoction for now.”

“All right!” came an enthusiastic reply as people bustled about.

What is this? I thought, an unpleasant feeling running through me. Wasn’t the inside of the temple a place of death occupied by infected

patients? I had been counting on that to help solidify Pharmia's position as a saint.

"Silence!"

The central room inside the temple was lined with a number of pillars, and my shout came from an area so high above that the depth could not be measured. Those who were hurrying about and the sick who were lying in the corners all looked up.

I changed my tone to bring even more attention to myself.

"What the hell is going on? Who gave permission to reform the inside of this sacred temple?" I asked, demanding an answer. "Is this what happens when Saint Pharmia is gone for even one day?!"

Yesterday, I hadn't let Pharmia step outside the mansion—not until the deal with the prince was over. I'd done this in fear that someone from the prince's side might kidnap her and ruin my deal.

"Whoever is responsible for this, step forward, now!"

As if surprised, Pharmia shouted from behind me, "Father!"

I had elevated her position and made her known as the Lady Saint, so why didn't even the people inside the temple follow her? I let out a disappointed sigh, a shadow now cast over my mood.

Just then, a man who appeared to be a doctor tried to step forward, but the boy who was with him stopped him. He was a small boy with a cloth on his head, and he held a large book, like some kind of log book, close to his chest. For some reason, Pharmia held her breath. I wondered why, but I couldn't bother with that now.

"Him? Seize him! All those in the Temple of the Hero King are under the protection of the Saint. Anyone who defies her is committing treason!"

The surrounding escorts obeyed me when I told them to kick him out. It was then that the doctors who were with the boy tried to fight back.

Suddenly I heard a metallic sound—an ephemeral, beautiful, pure sound that purified the place and penetrated the human heart. It reverberated through the space. The sound made everyone stop and look to a spot toward the back of the room. A group of people appeared from the side where the Hero King was interred. They were the priests who served the temple.

When I saw them, a feeling of exhilaration came over me. With them was the head priestess of the temple, who never appeared except during the country's most important festival and other events. Her authority in Sauslind, a country divided by politics, was absolute. She was almost like another king.

The head priestess oversaw the temples of each region. Knowing she had come made me feel even more exhilarated when I saw the person walking beside her. His golden hair and blue eyes shone with

authority; his unparalleled presence commanded everyone's attention. Even with the powerful head priestess beside him, he did not shrink back and showed no hesitation. No one was as unshakable as the crown prince.

Somewhere inside of me, I had a sudden thought. The prince and I had been raised in a similar way. Perhaps we were more like each other than I'd thought, although our ways of thinking and positions differed.

The head priestess! I watched as the people around us welcomed her presence with surprise and commotion. And then... *His Highness, Prince Christopher!*

The head priestess did not appear except for the birth of the king's children, the crown prince's ceremony, coronations, weddings, and deaths. Even I held my breath at the sight of her, but I came back to myself when I heard those around me calling the prince's name.

This was the first time the crown prince had appeared in a place where the Ashen Nightmare was rampant, to wish for the country's future. However, his face lacked its usual relaxed elegance and remained stiff and rugged.

I, Duke Odin, a great noble of Sauslind, was the one who had called these two incomparable people to this place at this moment.

"Everyone, listen!" With a quiet and powerful voice, I attracted the attention of the public. They all looked at me solemnly and sincerely. "Today, at this time, it is none other than Head Priestess Eva of the Temple of the Hero King, and His Highness who have come to visit us, to reveal the truth of what has been happening in the heart of the kingdom!"

In front of the noisy crowd, I bowed before the prince and the head priestess to give weight to what I said next.

"I, Grieg Odin, who has been granted the title of duke by his Majesty William Christen Ashelard, Sauslind's seventeenth king, hereby swear to speak the truth. The king is now lying in a sickbed, ill with the dreaded Ashen Nightmare!"

Sounds resembling screams filled the temple. Reactions flew among the crowd. His Majesty was also ill? I once again told them it was true, and cries of despair rose in an instant.

"That's not all," I said with a somber expression. "The hero who saved the country in the last great war, General Theoden Bakula, was killed by an unknown assailant the other day while he was escorting the crown prince's fiancée. And Lady Elianna Bernstein... Her precious life was taken away as well..."

"No!"

Devastated wails drowned out any other noise. I knew the audience would be heartbroken.

“But the cure! What about the cure?”

I saw many frantic gazes turned toward me. I nodded solemnly, then took a piece of paper from my bosom and held it up. “Before she died, Lady Elianna entrusted the recipe of the cure to Saint Pharmia! She begged her to save the lives of the citizens, and of the king!”

Shouts of jubilation filled the room. Hopeful faces all looked at Saint Pharmia.

The order of events did not matter. By the time the cure had been completed, they had probably already started administering it to His Majesty—before the courier had rushed in even. The fact that the prince had the cure was good proof. The important thing was that Pharmia had administered it to His Majesty with her hands and that his life was saved. I just had to let everyone know that in advance.

I was supremely satisfied that Pharmia’s name would be raised to the highest level. Finally, that eyesore, the Bibliophile Princess, had finally become useful to me, along with the completion of the cure!

I put the final touches on my performance and ceremoniously knelt down on one knee as I reverently offered the cure. I was convinced that not even the prince could defy the power of the head priestess.

“Head Priestess Eva. In the name of Saint Pharmia, I will present this cure to the temple. Please use it to save the people of this kingdom and...”

This was the only time I couldn’t help but look up at the expression of defeat on the prince’s face.

“Prince, please recognize Saint Pharmia, who has conceived your child, as the crown princess!”

The excitement and exhilaration reached its peak. I knew it was a very unusual event, but I couldn’t contain my delight.

“Head Priestess Eva. Your Highness. Please recognize this union!” Even though I was on one knee, my voice rang out strong and clear.

Hearing a small, pained grumble, I, Prince Irvin of Maldura, looked behind me. Rei, dressed as a palace guard, frowned as if he had a headache.

“Are you okay, Rei?” I asked.

He said yes, but neither his tone nor his facial expression were convincing. His clan’s ability was immeasurable to me, but there seemed to be individual differences, and I’d heard long ago that Rei was not very suitable. Their abilities were completely useless when they were far away from their target, but they were very effective up close.

“What does Grand Aunt say?”

“I said to stop calling her that.”

I burst out laughing, which was unsuitably carefree for someone who had invaded another country's royal palace.

It was Elianna who had told me how to contact the royal library staff through a bookstore in the royal capital. However, even though I'd contacted them, this still wasn't my country nor my palace. I couldn't break in right away, so I had waited for about a day and a half before finally entering the royal archive, but it was said to be on the outskirts of the royal palace.

I was thinking about how to get to the location I was aiming for, when the staff who had guided me handed me something.

"Um, it's a message," said the young employee named Konrad. He was quite frightened by this whole situation, but he calmed down once he was in his familiar library. The piece of paper he gave me was something I didn't recognize, though.

"A message? From whom?" I thought it would be from my brother, but it was from a completely different person. The content of the message filled me with irritation. Furthermore, it came with instructions.

If you're going to move, do it tomorrow. And then meet up with a certain person.

"What does that mean?" I was filled with doubts and confusion, but this was another country's royal palace. I hesitated, but I waited for another day, got the guard's clothes, and headed to the designated place.

"Lord Irvin, something is strange."

I noticed the state of the royal palace and the lack of people in it. I thought it was because of the current situation in the world, but something just didn't feel right. It was possible we had walked into a trap, but in this situation, that didn't make sense. Also, I knew Elianna was not the kind of person to do such a thing. I'd come all this way, so I just had to prepare myself accordingly.

I arrived at the corner, and the person I saw took my breath away.

"You are..."

A busy day in Sauslind was about to begin.

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Well, I, Elianna Bernstein, thought.

In Saoura, Sauslind Kingdom's royal capital, there stood a large temple related to the royal family. It was where the Hero King lay enshrined. Usually, it was closed as a sacred area that one could only enter after the general pilgrimage was over, but the place was now filled with enthusiasm and joy. The temple had been opened to those suffering from the Ashen Nightmare, and since then, the place had seen a jumble of people coming in and out. Normally, it should have

been a quiet place where people showed consideration to those who were ill.

Once inside, I'd first checked on the overall situation, then tried to figure out what was going on with the people still left outside. They weren't permitted to enter because those inside the temple were infected. If the temple accepted new people, the infection would spread to their families and the other people who had accompanied them. It would also spread to the doctors, nurses, and people who took care of the sick. As the epidemic spread, manpower would become scarce.

I understood that it was necessary to stop any more people from entering, but then what should we do? In search of countermeasures, I had shared the various knowledge I'd discovered in my journeys with the doctors inside the temple, as well as the follow-up observations of those who were afflicted with the disease and other various experiences. The doctors were from a hospital for the poor in the royal capital. I'd entrusted them with my wishes, and they had promised they would be fulfilled.

And then things began to move, which brought us to today.

I was overwhelmed by the spectacle that unfolded, and a doubt came to my mind. As I blinked my eyes, wondering how I should react, cheers rose from the crowd, directed at Lady Pharmia, who stood frozen on the spot.

I couldn't help but feel upset. I wished I could turn around and run away, but let me reiterate: I would not let His Highness stand alone. As I watched, Prince Christopher took a step forward and raised a hand to silence the crowd. He stood before Duke Odin. Everyone was waiting in anticipation, and there was a calmness as if they were preparing for the next round of cheers. Then his words echoed through the room.

"Only one woman will be my wife, and that is...Lady Elianna Bernstein!"

The duke's expression instantly changed, and confusion ran through the room. "Your Highness!" he uttered in a deep voice.

Prince Christopher's cold blue eyes fell upon him. "Duke Odin. Earlier, you swore on your name and title to speak the truth. Now then, let's hear it. Four days ago, the news of Elianna's survival and the completion of the cure came. According to your story, Elianna was targeted again sometime in the last four days and lost her life. How did you come about that information?"

People seemed even more confused, and the duke let out a small, soft sigh. He kept his stately demeanor about him and showed no emotion, like a true aristocrat. "Your Highness. Word of your relationship with Lady Elianna has spread among us nobles and the

people alike. I understand your unwillingness to believe it, but it's the truth. And if you still don't believe it, then I will show you her remains." He sounded and looked very sad, as if he were taking pity on the prince.

His Highness lowered his eyes slightly, and he went silent as if he were trying to settle something inside of himself. Then his vivid blue eyes rose to stare back at the duke once again. "So Elianna is dead. You're sticking to that?"

"I swear it."

The prince's gaze collided with the duke's unyielding one. Then he took a deep breath. "I understand," he said, turning on his heel as if he had made his mind up.

The duke was acting quite suspicious, and Lady Pharmia closed her eyes as if she were giving up. The next thing I knew, His Highness filled my vision. His bright eyes were like a clear blue sky. His chiseled jaw and youthful, beautiful face almost stunned me. There was still something hard about it, but he always looked at me with an earnest gaze, full of tenderness.

The solemn light of the temple shone upon his dazzling blond hair. There was no one like him, Sauslind's crown prince. As he came in front of me, the surrounding doctors stepped back, and I too flinched, staring at him with determination and, above all, fascination.

His blue eyes softened as he reached out to me. He took off the cloth that covered my head and put his hands in my hair to untie it. It spilled down past my shoulders. Then he gently smiled at me, ignoring the buzz of our surroundings. "Elianna—"

I heard people mutter in shock.

"Impossible!"

His Highness turned around and replied with his usual bright smile. "Me, give up on Elianna? In what world would that be possible? Not in this one."

The duke's expression changed for the first time since this had started. His face flashed with anger, as if his pride had been wounded.

On the other hand, the people there were surprised, and voices calling my name spread out one after another—even louder than before.

"She's alive!"

I was shocked at how overjoyed the crowd was. The people who had been cheering for Lady Pharmia now cheered for me. I was a bit conflicted, but I suppressed it as I firmly returned His Highness's gaze.

He smiled and put his arm around my waist, then turned once again toward the crowd. In a dignified manner, he stated, "My fiancée, Lady Elianna Bernstein, is right here! The story of her dying was completely false!"

The cheers grew even louder. Suddenly, the duke shouted, "Wait!" He stood up and spoke as one of the great aristocrats of Sauslind, this time without raising his voice.

"Lady Elianna is alive. I'm very happy about that. The information I was getting was wrong. I'll admit it. But Lady Elianna was reported to have been missing in Ralshen, and now she's here? Perhaps she has been kept safely in the royal palace this whole time and only shown herself now that the cure has been made? How can we know that it was really her who developed the cure?"

Our surroundings became noisy again.

Ever since the illness had broken out, Lady Pharmia Odin had left her mansion every day to comfort the sick. On the other hand, I had been far away, and no one had seen what I had been doing.

"The royal capital is steeped in the faith of the Saint. Even if you return, you'll face severe criticism."

Raqqa words came back to me. The old me would have been frightened, but now I had the encouragement of Prince Christopher and everyone who had supported me, and the confidence I had built myself. I did not shrink back. I raised my head. I felt the prince smiling next to me, and the hand that touched mine was filled with strength.

"Duke Odin. You have stayed in the royal capital and do not know the true situation in the countryside. The only thing we can trust is the word of the locals and their true experiences. Isn't that right?"

His Highness turned to the doctors behind us. The representative of the medical group nodded and spoke.

"This is the record that Lady Elianna brought with her from the Ralshen Region, detailing the care of the sick there. And it also contains new countermeasure methods that we didn't even know about. This is a person who experienced it firsthand. It's written by Lady Elianna herself."

A small chuckle escaped from the duke. "Your Highness. Enough with these childish games. Something like that could be easily fabricated if you had the necessary information beforehand."

"I see," His Highness muttered quietly. He put his hand in his pocket and showed everyone a new document. "This was delivered with a courier earlier. 'I swear on my name as Carl Ralshen, the lord of the Ralshen Region, that Elianna, the crown prince's fiancée, was the one who quelled the riots and saved the sick in this land, and I swear my allegiance to her.'"

His Highness's bright eyes looked around as he put the letter away.

"When the cure was completed in the Ralshen Region, the following information was also sent to Earl Hayden of the Edea

Domain. 'In the name of the crown prince's fiancée, Elianna Bernstein, I will disclose the recipe for the cure for the Ashen Nightmare to all sick people who have been affected by this disease and also provide the raw materials for it, not only to my own people but those of other countries.' After which the earl declared he would issue a statement of peace with the kingdom of Maldura."

All the color drained from the duke's face, but the crowd murmured with surprise and began to cheer again. There would be no battles. No war would begin!

"How dare you... Without even holding a meeting of the senior ministers council, and without a decision from the king!" the duke shouted, but the prince stared back at him resolutely, just as a steadfast monarch would.

"I will not use medicine as weapons or as bargaining tools. If I used life-saving cures in that way, my deeds would haunt the people long after I am gone. I will not make Sauslind that kind of kingdom. I will protect the people of the future."

Prince Christopher wasn't just thinking of the present; he was looking to the future, with the idea to never barter or gamble with the people's wellness. That was exactly what I had thought about Furya's Jar.

I was so overcome by emotions that I couldn't put into words, so entranced by his regal presence that I couldn't even hear the cries of those around me.

Prince Christopher then explained, "I gave Elianna the crest of the royal family as proof that she was my representative when she went to the Ralshen Region. The approval of the cure, the statement, and the order to the earl were all under the name of the royal family. Duke Odin, are you going against the royal family's decision, even though you are an aristocrat whose title was granted by the royal family and who is sworn to serve them?"

The duke himself was the first to mention that he had been granted his title by the king. Defying the king's decision was the same as treason, which he himself had spoken of.

For the first time, I saw a change in the duke's demeanor. Every word, every thought, everything he'd ever taken pride in was overturned.

The duke seemed to have been planning two things. One was to establish the status of Saint Pharmia with the cure in hand. The other was to use that as a weapon to negotiate with Maldura—but not peacefully. Armed with the cure, he would offer a deal to Maldura, with contingencies like favorable tariffs or mines with gold veins.

But now all of that was spoiled, and the recipe that the duke held carried no weight. He crushed it in his hand. The words he uttered

were still filled with hubris. “Your Highness, you have forgotten one more important thing, perhaps on purpose. My daughter is pregnant with your child. Everyone knows this. It is a fact, and no excuses you make can change that.”

Even though he had ostensibly directed this remark at His Highness, the look in his eyes made it clear that it was actually directed at me—and at the people who were confused by this.

I also shifted my gaze to Lady Pharmia, who was dressed modestly in her saintly clothing. She stood slightly behind the duke. Now we were in completely opposite positions than we had been before.

Lady Pharmia Odin was the only daughter of Duke Odin, the grand noble representing Sauslind, and the niece of Queen Henrietta. If I hadn’t been in this position, I might never have interacted with her in my whole life.

She was born and raised the same as Lady Therese, a woman who had been brought up in the opposite way as me, but Lady Pharmia and I were similar in some ways. For nearly five years, I’d spent time with her along with Lady Therese in the royal capital’s social circles.

Even though her eyes were open now, she was not looking at me or Prince Christopher. She was looking at someone else—Head Priestess Eva, the head of all the priests who oversaw the temples in Sauslind Kingdom.

The head priestess’s pure white hair was neatly pulled back, giving her a dignified atmosphere. You could tell at a glance that she was elderly, but she had a commanding presence. Her gaze was unapproachable and intimidating. Not only did that indicate that she was a woman, but that she was an existence that seemed to transcend gender as well. She was the king in charge of all the kingdom’s rituals.

Beneath the head priestess’s gaze, Pharmia faintly uttered, “I...” She was panting. Words spilled out from within her, high-pitched like a child’s, but she sounded decisive. “I am not pregnant with anyone’s child.” She continued speaking before the room broke out in commotion. “His Highness wouldn’t even lay a single finger on me!”

“Pharmia!” Duke Odin scolded. This was the first time I’d seen him be emotional. “You fool!”

He was about to yell at her again, but I started running. His hand still held the recipe for the cure, and he raised it in the air as if to hit her. I smacked it away with the book I was holding. I must have startled him, because he staggered backward, looking more shocked than in pain. For the first time in my life, I faced this person with sincere anger and no political resentment.

“I don’t care if you’re her father. Raising your hand to a woman is the most despicable act a man can ever engage in. Shame on you, Duke Odin!”

“Wha—?”

“Lady Pharmia is the Saint of Sauslind. Even if she made some mistakes, she continued to give hope and courage to the people after the Ashen Nightmare ravaged our land. I can’t deny it. Anyone who raises their hand to Lady Pharmia, whether it’s me, or even you, her father, is declaring Sauslind’s people their enemies!”

A few moments of silence passed as my words soaked into the audience. Then I heard people calling, “Lady Pharmia!” Even though it was faint, it was clear.

The duke was now visibly shaking with anger, and the sight of it made me tremble. Prince Christopher moved to stand in the way, partially hiding me. I could see that the duke’s anger had reached its peak.

“Fine,” he said, clad in a sort of gloomy glee. “You two will be known as the worst king and queen in the history of the kingdom. You deceived the enemy country that has sought friendship—the country that has been afflicted by disease and has asked for help—and attacked them. I will make sure your names go down as the worst rulers in the entire world!”

The duke was still trying to set something up. Sensing that, I raised my eyes to His Highness, and the duke’s low voice leaked out.

“This was exactly what I had planned—to sever diplomatic ties with his country. But I’ll stage it for you.”

The duke said it so that only we could hear, but then spoke loud and clear for all to hear.

“Everyone, do not be deceived! The start of the war has not been avoided. It’s only been hidden! The prince of Maldura, who is in the royal palace, has already died by the military’s assault force on the orders of His Highness. With that corpse, Sauslind plans to declare war on Maldura. A war with them cannot be avoided anymore, not under the reign of Prince Christopher and the Bibliophile Princess!”

A shock ran through me as I swallowed a scream. A door nearby opened loudly, and a stream of people came in. Everyone turned to look, and I was stunned by who I saw standing there.

“I apologize to the head priestess of the temple and to the people who have fallen ill for causing a ruckus outside. I am one of the Black Wing Knights, ordered by His Majesty to guard the eastern border.”

The short, gray hair and the sharp, strong gaze belonged to General Theoden Bakula, the hero of Sauslind. The reason everyone was shocked was that they had previously heard that he’d passed away. The story went that while escorting the crown prince’s fiancée, he had been killed by an unidentified assailant.

General Bakula’s powerful, gut-wrenching voice resounded before the roaring crowd. “There are those who deceive the people and

spread lies, but the truth is one, and it proves to be clear to all eyes. The prince of Maldura is unharmed and under our protection! We have arrested the members of the pro-war faction who disobeyed the crown prince's orders and tried to kill royals of another country. Unfortunately, we have also arrested a group of Black Wing Knights who were involved in the uprising as well. Our kingdom will never kill a member of another country's royal family, or start a war with them!"

Behind General Bakula, I saw a well-dressed man—a blind prince with his eyes closed. Next to him were two familiar men, Prince Irvin Orlanza and his attendant Rei. I was relieved to see that Prince Irvin was safe.

I then heard cheers coming from those outside the temple. They were so loud that we could even hear it from inside.

The people's confusion must have been extreme because of how much the situation kept changing. Nevertheless, as General Bakula had said, the facts were clear to everyone.

General Bakula, who was said to be dead, was alive, as was the crown prince's fiancée. The royal family of Maldura that His Highness was said to have harmed were alive and well, and no war had been declared.

Among the cheers were voices calling out the names of His Highness, the Bibliophile Princess, and General Bakula. And in the midst of that, a voice repeatedly gasped, "Idiot!"

It was now clear that the duke was the one who had lied to everyone. Even amid the cacophony, Prince Christopher's quiet voice was heard. "Duke Odin. I have received reports that General Bakula has seized evidence that you have engaged in smuggling illicit money that you obtained through secret communications with Maldura. It was His Majesty who sent him to gather the proof."

The duke's eyes went wide. His Majesty was now ill, which meant that he had ordered it before that.

"Even though His Majesty— Even though *my father* knew that it would put my mother in a difficult position, he decided to expose your crimes. Duke Odin...Uncle. I thought nobles like you were indispensable to the kingdom, but it wasn't just about promoting friendship and reform with Maldura. It's because we have aristocrats who act as such that we have an aristocratic society in this kingdom, but..."

I could feel His Highness's fist tightening around mine.

"You've gone too far. You used information about the spread of the illness to your advantage. You tried to destroy even the possibility of the cure. The act of trampling on the lives of the people—that's something that can never be forgiven."

The duke lifted his head with pride. All of his crimes had been exposed, and he had been publicly shamed, yet his attitude was still dignified. I couldn't help but acknowledge that he was a great noble.

His Highness ordered the guards, including Glen, who'd entered with General Bakula, to arrest the duke, and they rushed over. Meanwhile, I began to run.

"Grandpa Teddy!" As soon as I hugged him, I could tell he was in pain. I quickly raised my face and frowned. "But your injury..."

The last time I'd seen him, he'd been standing on a cliff, trying to protect my carriage...and then he'd been shot by an arrow. The crimson color of his blood mixing with the snow was still burned into my eyes.

As I cried over the fear I'd experienced then and the pain Grandpa Teddy had endured, he gave me a strong, kind, and familiar smile.

"What you did means so much to me." His warm, strong hand wiped my cheek. "Not being able to protect you completely will forever be a stain on my career as a warrior. I'm so glad you're safe, Eli."

"You're alive... I can't believe you're alive!" As I shook my head and cried, Grandpa Teddy gently patted me with one hand to soothe me. He then gave me a brief explanation.

Although he had been injured, he'd immediately tried to join the search, but Lord Alexei, the right-hand man of the crown prince, had stopped him and said, "This is an order from His Highness. He wants you to pretend to die for now."

Grandpa Teddy said that at that moment, he understood why Lord Alexei was called the Ice Scion, because his eyes were like a frozen glacier.

The events had happened a little out of order, but the letter I'd received from the crown prince had said that, from the beginning, the Black Wings Knights and I were to act separately. But the letter he gave Grandpa Teddy had said...

"There are some fools among our Black Wing Knights, some who want to go along with the pro-war faction and start a war," Grandpa Teddy paraphrased. "But if people thought I was dead, they would show themselves and make a move, so I was ordered to hide myself, return to the royal capital, and take care of the misconduct within the knights with my own hands."

Perhaps it was because he had not realized there were traitors inside his own group, or because the prince had arranged everything, but Grandpa Teddy let out a slightly exasperated breath as he stroked my head, seemingly soothing himself.

"Some soldiers believe that there is no place for them to make a difference unless there is a war. Even though we hone our skills every day in order to protect our country, we overlooked them. Because of

this, I put you in danger. This is my fault. On behalf of the Black Wings Knights, I apologize to you, Elianna.”

As I shook my head, his soft, soothing voice fell upon me.

“You have met the conditions I gave you with even better results, and so I will acknowledge you as the crown prince’s fiancée and Sauslind’s future queen.”

I looked up and met his strong and kind eyes, then once again buried my face against his broad chest to check his heartbeat. *Oh, Grandpa Teddy...*

“However,” he said in a firm voice, “perhaps you should reconsider your choice of spouse. Once he thinks he’s got a good plan, he won’t reveal it to anyone. He wants to take care of everything himself.”

I’d thought that myself too.

I wiped my face and stood up. I saw that the prince was coming over to us. His Highness looked irritated even though everything was settled, and Grandpa Teddy didn’t even try to hide his annoyed expression. They glared at each other, but the prince was the first to speak.

“As I thought before, you’re so old you can’t see clearly anymore, so perhaps it’s best if you retire. It is disgraceful to misunderstand the training of the next generation by clinging to the glory of the past,” he asserted adamantly, which only encouraged Grandpa Teddy even more. I involuntarily retreated away from him.

“You’ve got some nerve, whippersnapper. You only used my guards because you were afraid if I moved them, the other party would notice. You can’t even get any other pawns. You should be ashamed.”

“Don’t get upset just because you were used as a pawn. Why don’t you spend the rest of your life somewhere in peace and quiet?”

“How dare you speak to me like that! Why don’t you see if you can beat me?” Grandpa Teddy challenged, grabbing the hilt of his sword.

This childlike exchange completely dried up my tears. I noticed the guards were confused too, so I went to join them.

Chapter 13: Light and Shadow

Pharmia remained seated, seemingly oblivious to the voices around her. Her father, Duke Odin, was taken away by the imperial guards as if he were a servant, leaving only his daughter behind. She did not look at her father.

Once the guards left, I dropped to my knees, still holding my book. “Lady Pharmia.” She responded slightly when I called her name, and I saw a faint tremor in her cheeks as she lowered her gaze.

I had to settle things with her. I had a feeling this would be my last chance, so I opened my mouth to speak, but she beat me to it.

“It wasn’t for you,” she said.

Now that she had finally spoken, everything she had been suppressing all surged out in one big rush.

“I didn’t do it for you. I’ve always hated you, Lady Elianna. Do you understand how it feels when someone suddenly appears and takes away everything you ever wanted? Why did you have to be here? If not for you, I... Why are you trying to protect me? I didn’t want you to protect me. Anyone but you!”

I held my breath as her raw emotions hit me. My actions must have hurt and cornered Lady Pharmia even more than I had imagined. And just as I had feelings that I wouldn’t back down from, she’d done everything for the sake of someone else.

“You wanted to protect His Highness’s honor,” I said.

The story of His Highness and the Saint had spread throughout the country. It was undoubtedly a strategy of Duke Odin’s faction to spread rumors and make them come true. However, now that the duke’s evil deeds had been exposed and his falsehoods revealed, the only thing left to dispel were the rumors about His Highness and Lady Pharmia. I had a feeling they would remain among the people forever. In other words, it would lead to the disgrace of His Highness. That was why she’d said that she hadn’t done it for me.

I took her clenched hand and smacked it against my cheek before she could pull it away. There was only a dull sound, but she finally looked up.

“Please strike me as much as you like, Lady Pharmia. As much as you want, to make up for me hurting you, even though I didn’t realize that I had. After that, let me strike you too. I can’t forgive what you have done. Despite the fact that you gave the citizens hope as their

saint and distributed the dried pomelo fruit, you also worked to spread the virus, and I absolutely cannot forgive that.”

“What...?” A faint light appeared in her eyes. “You... You always think you’re so perfect, don’t you? Always on your high horse. What do you know? You act like you know it all, yet you’re always in a safe place where you’re protected. You don’t know a thing about someone like me. I hate people like you. Don’t talk like you understand.”

She didn’t hit me, but she did dig her nails in. A sharp, hot pain ran through me. Even so, I didn’t back down and continued to face her.

“But I like you,” I said, forcibly thrusting my emotions onto her, stepping into her position. “When I came to the royal capital, I was not used to society, but you always took care of me. Others only paid attention to me because I was the prince’s fiancée, but you always cared about me, and I didn’t take it for granted. I thought you understood people’s pain.”

I’d thought she was a caring person, even when I had been persistently bullied, when my clothes had been soiled, and when others had laughed at me. She had always been there to take care of me.

“Stop it. I told you I hate you,” Lady Pharmia replied.

“But I like you.”

“I said stop.”

At some point, I felt a surge of affection toward Lady Pharmia, whose voice was trembling. I put myself in Lady Pharmia’s shoes for the first time and thought about what she had been through. She wanted to make a name for herself as a saint and become Prince Christopher’s wife. I was sure she had experienced things that I couldn’t even imagine. I had nothing to give back to her either. On the contrary, that would surely hurt her even more. That was why...

“I was always envious of Lady Therese,” I stated. She was the flower of high society, adored by everyone. She was seen as the representative of the next generation who would lead everyone. I had felt this way for almost five years, since I first met Lady Therese. “I also wanted to call you Mia, Lady Pharmia.”

Her hazel eyes went wide. It was as if a dam had broken and her feelings were rushing straight toward me. Drowning in the waves, I couldn’t even breathe.

“Are you a fool?” she muttered, then collapsed into sobs.

Suddenly, her gaze flew to behind me, and I heard Jean yell, “M’lady!”

It wasn’t clear what happened and in what order. The surrounding people had kept a distance from us, and everyone who had committed a crime had already been taken away, so I had relaxed my guard. In

my peripheral vision, I saw Lady Pharmia raise her hand, her expression one of terror. Instinctively, I held up the book I always had in my hand.

“Ah!”

Something sharp pierced through the hard book, and the shock waves from it coursed through my whole body. A grubby man in front of me yelled something, and because I didn’t let go of what I was holding, his force threw me around. I was consumed by confusion. Both my arms felt severely numb.

Jean, who was unusually emotional, intervened. “Watteau!” Without even giving the man a chance to counter, Jean stopped him with his dagger in one blow. For a moment, their eyes met, but then the man collapsed and stopped moving. Jean stood up, hiding me with his lanky back. He was panting.

The room became noisy. The guards rushed in and began to move the crowd away. Among them, Jean muttered, “I could have ended up just like Watteau, if not for one thing.”

Both Jean and the man were once part of the royal family’s Shadows. What was this “one thing” he spoke of? I thought about what he’d said. Maybe the person by my side wasn’t Jean as he had been, but Jean as he was now.

I was still holding my large record book. It was an original design I’d created myself so that Jean couldn’t burn it anymore. It was the only one like it in the world.



Stuck deeply in the cover was the sword that had tried to take my life. A thick binding made of copper plate had stopped it from piercing clean through, and now the weapon was stuck. My design had finally demonstrated its purpose.

I muttered involuntarily as I thought. Perhaps I was in a state of mild shock. “Jean,” I said. He turned back and looked at me. “I finally understand. This is like catching a blade in your bare hands, from *The Travels of Marco Polo*!”

“Not exactly,” he said immediately, and I felt relieved. He was still the exasperated Jean I knew. He groaned as if he were in pain and asked why he must make that retort every time.

After meeting with His Highness the night before yesterday, Jean had come looking for me despite his injuries. Even now, despite his injuries, he had rushed over to save me. I decided that I should at least check on his wounds.

I shook off the guards holding me back so I could see if there were any other suspicious people around, but His Highness fell to his knees to get on my level and pulled me into his arms.

“Eli, please don’t,” he said, his voice trembling. “To come this far and lose you... I just can’t.”

It was as if I’d caught a glimpse of His Highness’s true weakness. He sounded desperate, far removed from his usual confident and dignified demeanor. I put my hand on his back to tell him that I was safe, and when I rubbed it soothingly, he took a deep breath to calm his racing heart. After he helped me up and confirmed that I was safe, his expression relaxed. With a sigh, he gently hugged me again.

Guards surrounded us. As they did, I saw that Jean was holding the book with the sword stuck in it, and I caught a glimpse of Lady Pharmia. Then another sharp sound startled me. The head priestess was coming toward the wall of guards, so His Highness led them and faced her.

Her face was impassive as she said, “I will take care of Lady Pharmia Odin.”

Prince Christopher looked a little hesitant, but he nodded. Lady Pharmia would probably be interrogated about her father’s crimes, but until then, she would be kept confined to the temple.

The surrounding priests moved in accordance with His Highness and the head priestess’s decision. I watched as they urged Lady Pharmia to her feet. As she left, I got the feeling I wouldn’t be able to speak with her ever again. We couldn’t go back to the past, but maybe someday...

I watched her almost as if I were praying, and she turned around and quietly called, “Lady Elianna Bernstein.”

My heart skipped a beat. I couldn't hide anything from her gaze, which seemed to strip me bare in the empty temple. Her eyelashes fluttered ever so slightly.

"I hope we meet again someday," she said.

I tried to calm my racing heart. His Highness and I quietly watched as she turned her back to us and disappeared into the depths of the temple.

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When I came out to apologize to the sick and the doctors for the turmoil in the temple, I was enveloped by even more cheers. It seemed that everyone was aware of what had happened inside, and when His Highness and I had shown up with General Bakula, the cheers had become even louder. In response, we promised to welcome the people camped out in front of the temple inside in the near future, then withdrew to the royal palace.

General Bakula hadn't finished with his business yet, so he went somewhere else with several Black Wing Knights. Irvin and the second prince of Maldura had also come to the temple to prove that they were safe, but they were moved to a separate room for their safety.

As soon as I returned to the royal palace, the maids rushed over with tears on their faces, probably because they had already received word of my return. However, they were still maids of the royal palace. They restrained their emotions and tore me away from His Highness, after which I began meticulously cleansing myself. After all, I didn't know from where the disease had originated. I knew that the security was stricter at the royal palace than anywhere else, but to be honest, I was just as mentally fatigued as when I was on horseback.

In order to hide my identity, I had been dressing like a boy for a long time, but now I finally returned to my appearance as a noble lady. The maids were so enthusiastic that even I hesitated a little. From there, Prince Christopher, who had refreshed himself, came to pick me up. He said his usual sweet words regarding my appearance and smiled at me—I was now blushing—then we immediately headed to the person I needed to greet the most.

Deep inside the royal palace, in a spot where only a limited number of people were allowed to enter, the first Imperial Guard, Glen's older brother, Sieg, and others were guarding a certain room. The servants lowered their voices, but as I entered, someone arose to their feet with a clatter. Queen Henrietta, the queen of Sauslind, stood there with a stern expression. She always appeared imposing to her opponents, but now she looked somewhat emaciated and stunned.

Recalling what happened earlier, I bowed politely to greet her. Then, all of a sudden, she rushed over to me and swept me in her

arms. I was surprised by both her warm embrace and her teary voice.

“I’m so...so glad you’re safe...Elianna!”

A wave of emotion rushed over me as I felt the warmth of her joy. So many things had happened, and Queen Henrietta must have been restless for a long time, but here she was, weeping over my safety.

Once that hit me, I burst into tears—from the relief of finally being safe and from the feelings of knowing someone was elated that I was okay. I felt as if I had crossed a very dangerous bridge and arrived at the other side intact. Scary thoughts, terrifying thoughts, painful thoughts, and so on overflowed all at once, and I cried in her embrace.

“Mother...” I said.

After waiting for us to calm down, Prince Christopher explained the situation, sitting at the seat that was prepared for him. First on the agenda was the condition of His Majesty the King, who was lying in a sickbed in the next room.

“At the time the cure was created,” he began, “Alex sent information in secret from the Ralshen Region. The royal pharmacists treated him and administered the cure, and his condition has improved, but we still can’t see him or talk to him yet. Dr. Harvey says the prospects for his recovery have increased.”

My heart ached as I thought of everything Prince Christopher and Queen Henrietta, who were worried about His Majesty, had gone through. It was the same thing I had felt when I was young, and now it had spread not only in Sauslind, but to other countries as well.

Dr. Harvey, the chief court physician, had sacrificed his sleep and kept himself confined to His Majesty’s hospital room. If he was with His Majesty, all would be well. I sighed in relief as my biggest worries melted away.

Prince Christopher then explained the events that had taken place in the temple to Queen Henrietta. He told her about the many crimes Duke Odin, Queen Henrietta’s older brother, had committed. She listened carefully to everything as if she had already prepared for this, and as resolutely as always, she was strict in her judgment, even though it was something that affected her.

“Do justice according to the laws of Sauslind.”

Sitting next to her, I involuntarily put my hand on hers. Queen Henrietta’s eyes softened a little. She looked at me, then returned her gaze to her son without hesitation.

“Those who are too full of themselves will eventually crush themselves. My brother dreamed too much. Perhaps he wanted to become another king who would rule over a puppet king from the shadows.”

There was only one king who governed Sauslind Kingdom. No one should be allowed to manipulate them from behind the scenes. I felt

the weight of it all, along with a sense of wonder.

Queen Henrietta's tone suddenly changed, and she was no longer speaking as the ruler of a nation. "If I had conceded even a little to my brother, I wonder if the results would have been different..."

Before I could utter a word of denial and stop her sad smile, His Highness cut in.

"That's not true, mother," he objected. His blue eyes were strong, but his words were somewhat childlike. "Uncle's desires must have been innate. Even if you had conceded, he wouldn't have changed. In fact, it's possible it would've made him worse. He never saw me as anything besides a willful child. He wouldn't have recognized anything but his own selfish desires."

Everyone was selfish at times, but the important thing was whether you could put that selfishness aside and recognize someone else who was better than you. Relationships, something that I couldn't understand just by reading books, were difficult and complicated.

The Queen replied with a small smile. "You just couldn't forgive him for targeting Elianna, could you?"

"Of course not. I would've followed him to the ends of the earth and made him regret it."

That's a little scary, Your Highness.

"I wonder who you got that stubbornness from," the queen said with an exasperated smile.

His Highness quietly stood up. "I still have things to do, so I must go. Eli, you rest here, please." The gentle smile on his face turned stern as he headed for the door. It was the same smile as the one I'd seen earlier in the temple...

I immediately stood and rushed over to His Highness.

"Eli," he said with surprise.

I grabbed his hand and squeezed it. "I will come with you."

For a moment, he looked as if he were about to tease me as usual, but then he realized I was not going to back down. He hesitated, seemingly searching for the words to stop me. "This isn't funny," he murmured, and with a small breath, he squeezed my hand in return.

I said my goodbyes to the queen, who was watching over me with a smile, and finally, the two of us headed to settle things with one last person.

Chapter 14: One Last Shadow

On the way there, we ran into Jean, who had changed his clothes and was waiting for us. I told him he could rest and again tried to check on his injuries, but he stopped me and returned the book made of copper plate. The sword had been removed, leaving only the damage it had wrought.

Sounding grumpy, Jean asked, “All right if I come along?” He seemed to know where we were headed.

His Highness agreed with a quiet sigh.

Since the inside of the royal palace was still a bit chaotic, we were surrounded by Glen and his guards. When we arrived at the room, my chest tightened. *It can't be.* I looked up at His Highness, who had a stern expression on his face, and he wasn't hesitating at all. That told me he was prepared to face this head-on, and so I strengthened my resolve.

We left the guards on standby and proceeded through the open door with only Glen, Alexei, and Jean. His Highness called out the name of the person standing by the window where the sunny winter sun shone in.

“Professor Orphen.”

Orphen looked up and smiled once he saw us. As usual, he seemed like a kindly old man. He had been Prince Christopher's chief tutor since childhood, and he was one of the “three wise men” of the royal palace.

“Your Highness, what's going on?” Orphen asked. “There's still a lot of commotion going on in the castle. It seems that Lady Elianna has returned safely, much to my relief.”

There must have been a lot happening in the royal palace, with the aggressive pro-war faction moving and members of the Black Wing Knights joining them. It wasn't unusual that Orphen had heard about it.

“Ah then, Lady Elianna...” he began, as if he were about to start one of our usual conversations about books, but His Highness interrupted him.

“Professor,” he said. “Aren't you the one who oversees the royal family's Shadows? Dirk Orphen.”

“Oh!” Orphen's eyebrows rose. “The royal family's Shadows, eh?” he said with amusement, then began explaining their history. “The

royal family's secret unit has been continuously employed since long before the Hero King. Behind the scenes, they protect and support the royal family, undertake secret investigations and missions, and even carry out assassinations of important people. In public, they are the royal guard, and in private, they are Shadows. They always protect and support the king so that his reign will not be overshadowed."

Orphen paused, then his cheerful laughter rang out. "Ho ho ho! You think I am in charge of them?"

Like an obedient student, Prince Christopher quietly replied, "The head of the royal family's Shadows is only revealed during the ceremony of succession to the throne, so I didn't know either. However, this time, there were some disturbing actions among the Shadows. They were following someone else's instructions, defying my orders as the temporary ruler."

"Oh?" Orphen said, urging him to continue.

"I gave two orders, one to protect Elianna and one to watch Duke Odin's movements. Unfortunately, those who were watching over Duke Odin defected and began targeting Elianna. That was the first problem. The second was that there were those who were trying to destroy the possibility of a cure."

"Ho ho! Your Highness, I think you know this already, but that can also be said of Duke Odin."

If Duke Odin was the leader of the Shadows, he could have done all those things and not been suspected. Plus, he was the one who had tried to squash any possibility of a cure.

"No," His Highness denied. "It was not Duke Odin. He didn't know about the existence of the book that led to the cure—*Furya's Jar*."

I'd had the same thought. The person who had talked about the ancient tome was Nigel, the chief herbalist and head of the Royal Pharmacy. At the time, I had thought it was just a legend, but I had later found out that a research journal called *Furya's Jar* actually existed. And the other person who was present during that talk was...

"You were the one who told the duke about my friend Ian in advance," His Highness stated, trying to mask his emotions. "Only a small number of people know that when I was fifteen, I met Ian by chance in a port town, but the Shadow that followed me then would know."

Ian Brennan, one of the Black Wing Knights, was a friend of His Highness. I had met him only once. Rather than a knight, his gentle atmosphere made him seem more like a noble's son.

His Highness's voice contained a hint of irony as he continued. "A delegation from Maldura was coming. At the same time I received the news, I ordered the Shadows to investigate Alexei, Glen, Alan, Uncle Theodore, Alfred, Marquis Bernstein, the senior chamberlain—

everyone around Elianna. One Shadow, however, had a hunch that the report was mixed with lies, because there was a subtle difference from what I had heard from him in the past—but just in regards to Ian.”

Who could tamper with the Shadows’ report?

“Hmm,” Orphen hummed as he stroked his mustache. When he continued, his words took my breath away.

“I’m pretty sure that person... Well, there were reports that he died in an unexpected accident.”

Bewildered, I looked at His Highness.

“Did you attack him? Your own friend?” Orphen asked in a soft voice.

“Yes...” His Highness replied reluctantly. Sounding emotionless, he added, “Because he was the one who intentionally infected His Majesty.”

Ian had deliberately infected the king with The Ashen Nightmare. That was a mortal sin for which no excuses or circumstances could be considered.

As I stared at His Highness, my chest tightening, Orphen let out a peal of laughter that sounded like an owl hooting. I doubted my ears and returned my gaze to him.

“Well, you’re still a bit naive, but I think it’s a passing grade, Your Highness.”

“So you acknowledge that you are in charge of the Shadows?”

“Am I?” Orphen still wanted to play dumb even though we had gotten this far, but his words were that of someone who had the power of decision. “It’s one of the trials imposed on those who sit on the throne. Will the king act out of his own selfishness? If he does, it will send the kingdom into chaos. I could’ve used Alexei or Glen, but they were too loyal. Even if their families and lovers were taken hostage, they would have shown their loyalty to His Majesty and you.”

I could feel His Highness’s hand clenching into a fist, yet Orphen sounded indifferent, even though he saw Glen and Alexei standing behind us.

“In addition, it was possible that they would take their own lives out of loyalty. You wouldn’t have been able to overcome that yourself. Still, Your Highness, you are as naive as you ever were.”

Orphen then directed his calm gaze at me.

“Whether he was a friend or not, if Ian’s crime had been revealed, Duke Odin’s crimes would have come to light then as well. And then Elianna wouldn’t have been targeted, and the clue to the cure wouldn’t have been in danger either. You still have a long way to go, Your Highness.”

It felt as if poison were creeping into my chest. Orphen was

speaking as if Prince Christopher had weighed my life and the clue to the cure against his friend's honor.

"Your words are all lies, Dirk Orphen," Prince Christopher declared. His voice was no longer that of a student answering to his teacher. "First of all, you informed Duke Odin about my friend Ian, in anticipation that his betrayal would render me unable to care for Elianna. And you told him about *Furya's Jar*, that it might hold a clue to a cure. You also told him it was possible that Elianna was in possession of it."

I had been targeted on my way to the town where the riots occurred. At that time, my life itself had been in danger. That must've been on Duke Odin's orders. However, Dr. Furness's research book was of equal value to *Furya's Jar*; it was a clue to the cure. Who had ordered it be destroyed?

"Even if you were trying to put me through a trial to become king," Prince Christopher went on, "I can't understand the fact that you tried to erase the clues of the cure. You were worried. Even if you got rid of Elianna, someone else—a member of the Bernstein family—could obtain it and complete the cure."

I was also staring back at Orphen, the gentle-looking old man with a white beard, holding my breath.

"Elianna Bernstein is the crown prince's fiancée, and the Bernstein family is known by their secret name of Sauslind's Brain. You wanted to insult them, didn't you?" Prince Christopher asked. "You wanted people to say that not even a family with such a reputation could figure out a cure for the disease that strikes fear into the heart of our continent."

"What is 'Sauslind's Brain'?" Orphen asked. "After all, aren't they nothing but bigheaded people who are only useful in times of war when others' lives are taken?"

Orphen's laugh was scornful, but the dignified voice of His Highness overpowered it.

"You are not one of the 'three wise men' of the royal palace. You are just a snob like Duke Odin, who was inflated by your own suspicion and jealousy."

Orphen's expression changed completely. The eyes under his heavy-looking eyebrows became sharp and cold.

"Ho ho. You've got some nerve, seeing as how inexperienced you are. The only reason you realized it is probably because the servant there talked about it."

I knew without looking back that Jean had twitched, and this time, I was the one who responded—involuntarily and emotionally. "Jean didn't say anything! He never said a word about you!"

How had Jean felt when he had come back to me? I'm sure he had

been more lost and worried than I could imagine. Even so, he had returned, probably because he had faith in me—because he believed me when I said I would accept everything about him, no matter what.

“Hmph!” Orphen grunted coldly. “And yet he betrayed you.”

I trembled in pain, and His Highness lightly squeezed my hand.

“That’s not the only reason I set my sights on you,” Prince Christopher stated. “This time, Duke Odin unfortunately predicted my movements. I had no choice but to fall behind. This has never happened before, so I thought someone might be giving the duke advice. And something about the way he spoke gave me *déjà vu*.”

His Highness paused before continuing. “Professor, ever since I was young, I played many board games with you. Just as you read my moves, I picked up the habit of reading yours. This time, Duke Odin’s moves were much like ones you would make.”

With a coldness I’d never heard from him before, Orphen replied, “He seems to have fallen into a trap you set. Did you deliberately arrange for Lady Elianna’s decoy? He thought he had won, but that was his greatest moment of confusion. So yes, I did give him advice, but he thought he’d done it all on his own, and he didn’t listen to me.”

Orphen was admitting everything. I felt His Highness’s fist tightening.

“Why?” he whispered. “Why did you use Ian? Even if Duke Odin gave the order, you should have offered any other option. Why did you use my friend to hurt my father?!”

“Have you already found the answer yourself?” Orphen replied.

That quieted His Highness’s rage, and even though his voice was that of an adult, he still sounded like a young student.

“You wanted to hurt me,” he said.

“Ho ho.” Orphen walked to a desk near the window. “Isn’t that unfair, Your Highness? It’s like I’ve been living in hellfire in the depths of the earth for a long time. It’s surprising to me that such a creature lived among humans. I’ll never forget it. Almost forty years ago, during the Continental Highway War, I witnessed for the first time the genius of it. Sauslind’s Brain turned the strategy I had devised into dust.”

Orphen directed his gaze at me, and I held my breath. His Highness went to step protectively in front of me, but I stopped him. That was the battle in which General Bakula became famous as a hero, thanks to a certain strategy that overturned the war in his favor all at once. I had heard that my grandfather, Eduard Bernstein, had thought of it and given it to General Bakula. And behind them was Orphen.

“They don’t voluntarily step up to the stage. Instead, they stay in the shadows. It’s disgusting. They only want to show off their talent in emergencies. What cowards.”

The words he directed at me were clearly meant to hurt me. “Lady Elianna,” he said, his voice like a poison that slowly seeped in, “have you ever thought about it? If it weren’t for you, this turmoil might not have ever happened. If Lady Pharmia or Princess Mireille had married His Highness, I don’t think Duke Odin would have resorted to such means. And Lady Pharmia would have walked the path of a proper noble daughter. How many people’s lives have been disrupted just because you showed up?”

“Orphen!” Prince Christopher shouted and took a step forward. His anger was unprecedented, but Orphen continued regardless.

“The same could be said for you, Your Highness. If the Bernstein family, who I have always hated for their existence above all else, had lived in seclusion in the countryside forever, the creatures within me would have been quiet. Why did they have to appear before me again? They even deceived my student. If she hadn’t become His Highness’s fiancée, I would have never betrayed and hurt him.”

“That’s enough!” Prince Christopher yelled, stomping loudly to stop Orphen. He sauntered over to him and grabbed him by the collar. “Don’t hurt people with your selfish reasoning! All humans get jealous and greedy. Don’t blame others for the fact that you’re so immature you couldn’t control your impulses! Other people don’t exist for you to take your feelings out on. Just as you have simmering emotions, they do too!”

“Ha,” Orphen replied with a small smile. “You’re so naive. Simmering emotions? Is there such a thing for a clan only interested in books? Or for those who can only cry?”

I realized that I was also crying when I looked at him again. The words he said hurt—he had denied my very existence—but when I tried to wipe away my tears, Prince Christopher rushed over with a worried look and hugged me.

“Professor,” he said, filled with resolve. “You didn’t do anything directly. The one who will be publicly judged is Duke Odin. But...I will never forgive you.”

Ian had infected His Majesty with the disease, and Duke Odin had entrapped Ian, among other crimes. Orphen had only told the duke about Ian and the possibility of a cure. Plus, the royal family’s Shadows could not be exposed.

His Highness embraced me tightly as I listened to Orphen’s laughter.

“Ho ho ho,” he repeated with a cheerful tone. “Of course, from the moment I stepped onto this path, I was prepared.”

I was surprised by that and instantly pushed the prince away with the book I was holding and rushed over to Orphen with enough momentum that I toppled over the poison he was trying to drink.

There was a small cracking noise, and his eyes opened wide beneath his heavy brow. My emotions reached their peak as I looked down on him with fierce anger.

“How much do you have to hurt people to be satisfied? If you hurt yourself, it will cause His Highness and Jean so much pain. Killing yourself atones for nothing! I will not forgive you for choosing such a cowardly path!”

His eyes widened, then in a mocking tone, he said, “You won’t allow me to harm myself? You want me to live and see the splendor of Sauslind’s Brain while carrying this boiling hatred. Alive, I can taste the thoughts of beings in the depths of the earth. Are you saying that’s the life I deserve?”

“Yes,” I responded to his twisted gaze. “You once said that there is nothing harder than seeing the disciple die before the teacher. Professor Orphen, why can’t you say the same for the opposite of that?”

Older people died first. That was the providence of nature. But that didn’t mean no one mourned over their passing.

“Those who are left behind will surely grieve. They will regret it. They will blame themselves. It’s the same for anyone’s death. If they lose you, people will suffer from injuries. I will never forgive anyone, no matter who they are, who hurts His Highness.”

Orphen’s eyes widened again. I could no longer hold back, and large tears spilled from my eyes. “I saw a lot of bodies at the foot of Mt. Urma. I don’t want anyone else to die.”

I hadn’t made it there in time. I never wanted to feel that way again ever again.

Prince Christopher, who was on his knees next to me, stood and held me against his warm chest while I sobbed. He then said to Orphen, “Professor, do you hold a grudge against the royal family because the late Queen Amalia held one?”

I was so surprised by those words that I stopped crying for a moment. A quiet conversation took place behind me as I suppressed my hiccups.

“When did you notice?” Orphen asked.

“From around the time you said it was a trial given to the king.”

Queen Amalia had carried a grudge against the royal family until her dying day. During her reign, besides being the mother of three children—William, the current king of Sauslind; Rosalia, Alexei’s mother; and Theodore, who was said to be her favorite—she had contributed greatly to the reconstruction of the Ralshen Region after the Continental Highway War.

“Really... You’re a shrewd person,” Orphen replied.

“Just like my teacher.”

“Don’t compare yourself to me. I will take these demons and go to the bottom of the earth.”

“Please do so,” His Highness replied with his usual tone, a mixture of boredom and sadness. “You still have something to do for me, though, Dirk Orphen. The dead, and the grudges Queen Amalia left behind, will be uprooted. Until that’s over, I won’t let you retire comfortably.”

“Are you trying to abuse an old man?”

“Of course. Until he becomes shriveled up.”

I was a little horrified and quickly tried to move away from Prince Christopher, but his arms wouldn’t let me.

Orphen sighed deeply as he saw me flailing. His voice sounded different from before, with a kindness that penetrated my heart. “I still hate the Bernstein family, but the fact that you have Lady Elianna as your spouse... Even as a foolish master, I am happy about it.”

Professor Orphen. I turned around involuntarily and saw his cheerful face.

“You look terrible,” he said.

I realized I probably did look terrible after crying so much. His Highness smiled and lent me his handkerchief. Glen took Orphen away, then Jean, the prince, and I left the room.

His Highness took me somewhere where we could be alone. I hurriedly tried to fix myself up while he teased me. As I angrily blew my nose, he suddenly pulled his warmth away from me. I looked up but didn’t see his usual confident face. Instead, he wore a solemn expression.

“Eli. One thing that Orphen said was true. I didn’t expose Ian’s crimes to the public.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Ian... His lover and his family were taken hostage. They were all infected with the Ashen Nightmare.”

I finally understood. Just as Orphen had said, if Ian’s crime had been exposed, the duke’s crimes could have been revealed earlier. But then the lives of those who’d been taken hostage would have been lost. No matter what the circumstances were behind the crime, Ian’s betrayal would not have been taken lightly. Laying a hand on a member of the royal family was just that serious of an offense.

“I secretly made arrangements to help them, and slowed down the disease’s progress with a suppressive drug,” Prince Christopher explained. “I’m sure the cure will be delivered there soon. Once they find out what happened, they might resent me. I decided to prioritize my friend’s feelings, even though it meant taking his life.”

His Highness had been forced to hurt his own friend. His position as the crown prince and his position as a friend—they had both come

to the same uncompromising conclusion.

"I'm sorry, Eli," the prince suddenly apologized.

I blinked. The blue eyes that always looked straight at me were now looking down, as if they were afraid of something.

"I don't even have the right to touch you. I put you in danger over and over again and hurt you. I know you came back here, but if..."

He trailed off, as if he didn't want to finish what he was saying, but he had such a strong sense of responsibility that he continued anyway.

"If you want to step down as my fiancée, I will respect your wishes. I can't say that something like this will never happen again. I might put you in the same danger once more. Of course, I would be very careful not to do so," he said bitterly.

This was the first time I'd ever seen him like this. Normally he was always relaxed and confident, full of dignity and splendor befitting the crown prince, but he was hurting now too. He had killed his own friend himself and even condemned his childhood tutor. He had also confronted His Majesty's illness and went up against his own uncle.

What's more, I was sure he'd been in pain for a long time because I had been in danger. Had it been the other way around, I would have been heartbroken too. Therefore, he thought this was the best way to atone.

"Your Highness," I whispered, startling him. He looked like a scolded child as he waited for me to continue. "Are you okay with me marrying another man?"

He clenched his fist so tightly I could see his veins bulging, and I thought maybe I had teased him too much. After all, I had decided not to hand him over to Lady Pharmia or anyone else.

I gently knelt down and hugged His Highness, who was looking down in remorse, to my chest. Seeing his surprise, I stroked his golden hair, which I'd been hesitant to touch just a while ago. The thought that I might not have ever been able to touch him again filled me with love and affection.

"Your Highness...Prince Christopher...I like all of your weaknesses, and I like how you show them only to me. You used to say that even if I ran away, you'd catch me again and again. That's why I'm going to catch you this time."

He sat up a little, touched my cheek with his hand, and stared back at me with slightly cloudy eyes.

"Even if I lose my status as your fiancée, I'll win the place at your side back myself. I will never give up."

"Eli."

"Please let me be by your side at all times, whether they are good

times or hard times. Even if we do end up in danger, we'll be able to get through it together. Isn't that right?"

We were at a turning point in an era when history was changing. If I were alone, I would drown, but I knew that as long as I was with him, we could overcome anything together.

When I repeated those words, his beautiful face crumpled as if he were about to cry. I wanted to tell him everything I was feeling right now.

"Dear Christopher, please make me, Elianna, your wife."

"Eli..."

He wrapped his arms around my back and pulled me close. I tilted my head toward him as we exchanged our feelings, a symbol of the promise we'd made. As soon as we pulled away from each other, I tried to look into his eyes, but he buried his face against my chest. I was slightly embarrassed, but I gently wrapped my arms around him.

This man was a king. I didn't see that side of him now, but I hoped that I would continue to be the only one to whom he showed his weaknesses. I wanted to keep our sights set on each other from now on so that our hearts wouldn't be separated—so that we would never part.

As I hugged him, Prince Christopher said in a trembling voice, "Elianna...I love you."

Chapter 15: Maldura's Secret

Once both of us calmed down, I left the room, only to see a familiar face outside the door.

"Eli!" The moment I pushed through the guards, my brother Alfred hugged me. "I'm so glad you're safe!" His body was trembling, and he sounded like he was on the verge of tears. I sobbed in response.

I looked up and saw my father standing there with a slightly stiff expression. I smiled and ran over to hug him. It tickled me to think how similar they were.

"I'm home, Father. I'm sorry I worried you."

"Eli...!" Ever since my mother died when I was six years old, my father cried more easily. "I'm sorry," he apologized, and I could hear so much emotion in his voice that all I could do was shake my head.

Maybe nobody could do anything about it. My father and grandfather had a mission that the family had inherited long ago, along with certain qualities, and because of that, they just didn't get along with others. But from now on, little by little, even if it was difficult, I would improve the things that needed to be changed.

When I looked back at my father, he gave me a somewhat sad expression. "I still won't let you marry her," he said stubbornly.

I blinked, then realized my father wasn't talking to me. Behind me was His Highness, who seemed to be preparing himself for battle, and my brother, who was laughing unconcernedly.

Next to my brother was Lady Anna, who was holding back tears and rejoicing that I was safe. Several workers from the library and other palace staff, along with some pharmacy staff who wanted to see I was safe with their own eyes, were there. This impromptu gathering made me realize that I had finally returned to the royal palace.

The next day, after I had finished greeting everyone and making various appearances and explanations, an urgent meeting was held with the two princes of Maldura, Prince Christopher, and me, Elianna.

There I saw Prince Irvin's older brother, Reglisse Carranza, the second prince of Maldura, whom I had met once before. He was blind and kept both his eyes closed. His straight black hair fell below his shoulders and was loosely tied to one side. His appearance was soft and gentle—the complete opposite of Prince Irvin, who sat next to me.

Even now, he held a cup of tea with a smile on his face.

I had already greeted him, but I couldn't stop staring; his graceful gestures and the way he enjoyed the aroma of the tea made it difficult to believe he was visually impaired. Even though I knew it was rude, I kept watching with admiration.

Suddenly, the small spoon attached to Prince Reglisse's tea set disappeared. In the blink of an eye, it reappeared from Prince Reglisse's left palm. I stared at him again, and it disappeared again. This time, it reappeared from inside his right sleeve. I couldn't help but applaud the spoon that moved like a small animal while I wondered what was going on.

Prince Irvin, who was flipping through the documents next to Prince Reglisse, took a deep breath. "Brother, if you have time to play childish tricks, check the documents instead."

"It might be a private meeting, but why can't she enjoy it?" Prince Reglisse responded.

"Now listen here," Prince Irvin said indignantly, but he had an earnest look about him that I'd never seen before. I wondered if that was how he acted around his brother.

All of a sudden, a thought crossed my mind—how had Prince Reglisse known about my reaction? Meanwhile, Prince Irvin grunted, put the document on the table, and slid it to His Highness, who was quietly drinking tea next to me. There was a sharp, ironic look in his eyes.

"Evidence that Duke Odin and our third prince were secretly connected? How generous of you, princes," His Highness remarked.

Prescriptions and raw materials for remedies were provided free of charge to the sick, just as His Highness had said earlier at the temple, and they couldn't be used as bargaining tools either. However, the kingdom of Maldura couldn't help but apologize even though it was my name that had been brought up. They had more evidence as well.

I could see that Prince Irvin was being cautious. He wondered what kind of conditions we were going to impose based on this new information.

His Highness quietly returned his teacup to the table and said, "What? It seems that the fifth prince over there illegally entered the country again and helped my fiancée in some way. Considering the price, it's cheap." He had a familiar smile on his face. "I'm different from someone who has worked hard to collect this level of evidence."

A scary atmosphere pervaded the room, and I inadvertently pulled away from His Highness. Prince Irvin's face also twitched violently.

"I wonder why?" Prince Christopher continued. "It sounds like you're going to stay out of Sauslind for the time being because of

internal political disputes with this material evidence?"

"At least your ears seem fine." Prince Irvin, who seemed even more indignant now, took a deep breath and changed the direction of the conversation. "Well, that's right. Until the disease and other matters settle down, your marriage will be postponed, won't it? Well, at least that might drive my biggest threat away."

Prince Irvin grinned, and now His Highness looked indignant. "Who are you calling a threat?" he shot back.

I could tell now that the conversation between His Highness and Prince Irvin was not progressing, and I looked to the two people who stood behind Maldura's second prince for help.

Rei, Prince Irvin's attendant, had already taken off his disguise, revealing the same pure white hair and graceful features as when we first met. A Maldurian maid stood next to him, giving off a similar atmosphere. It was puzzling. At first glance, she looked like a very ordinary maid, but...

Prince Reglisse gave me a small smile. "Those bluish-gray eyes look like they're about to fall out of your head, Lady Elianna."

My eyes grew even wider, and Prince Irvin paused his argument with Prince Christopher and looked at his brother. He hesitantly tried to stop him, but Prince Reglisse said, "Oh, it's fine." Both of his eyes were definitely closed, but he was looking straight at His Highness and me.

"It seems that His Highness already knows the secrets of our royal family. Besides, Lady Elianna not only helped us with food assistance earlier, but now she has helped us with medical assistance. Maldura cannot come close to repaying her."

"Still, that doesn't—"

Ignoring Prince Irvin, who was still trying to stop his brother, Prince Christopher replied, "God's Beloved Prince. Does your name in the Maldura royal family mean that you are blind, yet actually able to see in some way?"

I was shocked, but Prince Reglisse smiled softly. "Today, Lady Elianna is dressed in a pale pink and soft gray gown. Spring flowers are embedded in the lace. They look like lovely blooms that have gently sprouted in early spring."

Oh my goodness! I blinked in surprise, but I could see that His Highness was even more displeased. Perhaps he should have commented on the pattern of the tea set instead of my clothing to affirm Prince Christopher's suspicions.

Prince Reglisse laughed a little at my reaction. He certainly was Prince Irvin's older brother. "My mother is from a slightly special clan. Even I, who inherited that blood, can use strange powers. Unfortunately, it's not very useful without an intermediary."

When I looked at the intermediary, the maid behind him, she asked for permission to speak and touched her bangs once. Then, just like Prince Reglisse's magic trick earlier, she suddenly changed completely, becoming a stunningly beautiful woman with pure white hair and silver-gray eyes. She looked very similar to Rei in this form.

"Goodness!" I exclaimed, and I heard a laugh that sounded like a tinkling bell.

"You are a very honest person, Lady Elianna Bernstein. I have been able to see your activities in detail through Rei here. I wish I could take you home with us to Maldura."

I felt Prince Christopher growing even more tense beside me.

The woman was full of confidence and spoke with accumulated experience, which was hard to believe from a maid. As I looked at her in surprise, she smiled at me, then introduced herself.

"My name is Nina. I'm a descendant of the Rimuru people, a clan of star guides who serve the Maldura royal family."

"Star guide..." As soon as I realized what she meant, I leaned forward eagerly. "You mean, those who served the former Kai Arg Empire and supported it at its peak, then abruptly disappeared, their footsteps fading from history—that clan?"

The woman nodded, looking like a historical figure that had come back from time past.

I clenched my hands in ecstasy. "Is that mysterious technique also the power of the Rimuru people? Or can only star guides use it?"

When I asked again if Rei usually wore a disguise, Lady Nina smiled at my curiosity. "Only a few members of the clan have inherited this power. Rei, for instance... Even though he has inherited the characteristics of his ancestors in appearance, his abilities are empty. It's a waste of treasure."

Rei looked away in disgust at her harsh words.

"By the way," Lady Nina said, leaning forward, "do you know the person who was riding with Rei on the horse when they returned to the royal capital? Rei didn't inherit the power, but it seems like that person might have. Could you introduce me? I think they might have Rimuru blood too."

Oh my goodness. A certain lazy manservant came to mind. However, when I smiled and shook my head, Lady Nina withdrew regretfully.

"And Lady Elianna, what you see with your eyes is not necessarily the truth," she said, giving me a mischievous warning. "Honesty is a virtue, but there are people like His Highness, the Crown Prince, who are not deceived by the Rimuru's abilities. What His Highness sees may be different. It is also important to determine what the truth is."

My heart raced. It reminded me of the misunderstanding between

the former Queen Amalia and the former king. It was a mysterious feeling, but I nodded my head obediently as expected.

Lady Nina smiled and continued to speak words of temptation. “Lady Elianna, in our country, we have all sorts of treasured books, including those that contain not only the true history of the former empire, which has never leaked to other countries, but other kingdoms as well. Wouldn’t you like to see it?”

I almost nodded emphatically, but I managed to stop myself after seeing Prince Christopher’s face. *Your Highness, sometimes you can be so scary that it takes my breath away.* I was itching to ask what kind of other books there were, but I decided to focus on the seriousness of the situation.

Lady Nina turned her eyes to His Highness and let out a small sigh. “A narrow-minded gentleman only restricts women. He cannot allow a woman’s abilities to surpass his. Because such a man holds the initiative in the world, I think that women will always be seen as being of low value. Don’t you agree, Prince Christopher?”

“Objectively, I agree with parts of that, but if you see this incident as a debt of gratitude, why don’t you just present your precious books to Eli, Black Witch of Rimuru?”

“Well!” Lady Nina’s beautiful eyebrows shot up. “That’s not a pleasant way to address me, Your Highness. I wonder who would have spoken such a name,” she said, directing her eyes at Rei. Rei seemed to be leaning away from her and turning his face to escape her line of sight.

Prince Reglisse laughed for a moment but held it back and returned to the topic. “Well, there you have it. People related to the clan can see the same scenery. Although there are differences in ability, it’s thanks to Nina that I was able to see and learn about all the things that happened to Prince Christopher, Lady Elianna, and my brother Irvin. Nonetheless...”

His voice became a little stiffer. It was apparent that he wanted us to keep the truth about Nina and the Rimuru clan a secret.

Prince Reglisse smiled at me. “Why did they disappear from history? You know the answer to that, Lady Elianna.”

I gasped when it hit me. The reason those with peculiar powers vanished—that would be the same no matter the era. They had been targeted by those in power at the time. I nodded in reply.

As I thought about the history of the Rimuru clan, His Highness, who was focused on the present, asked, “There are quite a few other Rimuru people, aren’t there?”

“Well, yes. But why do you ask?” Prince Reglisse questioned.

His Highness smiled at Prince Reglisse, who gently smiled back. “Because you were so quiet this time.”

I thought so too. The Maldurian nobles and the soldiers who'd come with Prince Reglisse hadn't resorted to force this time, so in a sense, things had ended peacefully. Perhaps someone from the clan was hiding there as well.

In addition, a prince of Maldura had been detained. That fact alone would have fueled the fire for a militant nation, yet none of the people from Maldura had resorted to force. That was because...

"You used that ability to not only issue a cease-fire to free the Maldurian soldiers detained here, but to inform your home country as well. Perhaps through the eyes of the witch there, you were waiting for information about the cure to be released."

It was a little late to feel this way, but I suddenly found myself terrified.

Disclosing prescriptions for therapeutic drugs and providing raw materials free of charge—without that, war might have commenced long ago. I once again thought that even those with a gentle atmosphere could be scary and shouldn't be taken as they appear.

"You are also a shrewd person, Your Highness," Prince Reglisse remarked, sounding just as shrewd himself.

Something that would certainly stop the Maldurian army from attacking... If I hadn't studied the abilities of people from other countries, this situation might not have been resolved peacefully. I wondered how far he could foresee the future. Prince Christopher didn't need Sauslind's Brain. That was the nature of a king, I thought again to myself.

"Hmph," Prince Irvin interrupted, sounding sarcastic. "In the end, no matter how you tried to cover your tracks, you were relying on others, right?" Prince Irvin laughed, saying that the crown prince alone couldn't receive all the credit. Then their verbal battle resumed.

"It's normal for a member of the crowd to be jealous of the main character, so please envy me as much as you can," Prince Christopher said immediately with a sneer.

"Well, I'm the one who spent so much time with El that the main character's shadow faded into the background," Prince Irvin retorted.

"What?!" the prince exclaimed.

It was only at this moment that I finally understood the significance of having Prince Reglisse sitting opposite me. His Highness and Prince Irvin were boldly arguing in front of others, so maybe they were actually good friends?

In order to proceed with the conversation with Prince Reglisse, I decided to concentrate on the division of roles, because they needed to take the cure and return home as soon as possible.

The next day, during a senior ministers council, the emergency

return of the Maldurian delegation was formally decided. It happened unusually fast, but the Maldurian delegates seemed ready to go home before it even happened. It all proceeded very smoothly and naturally. Only a small number of people gathered in front of the royal castle to see them off.

On the way to the border, the same Black Wing Knights who had accompanied me on the way to the Ralshen Region were supposed to escort me, but instead, General Bakula himself showed up. I was worried about his injuries and told him he didn't have to come, but he gave me an irritated look.

"I could fight an entire regiment from the enemy by myself!" he boasted.

When I was about to return to His Highness and Prince Reglisse, who were exchanging greetings, Prince Irvin took me to the side, near a carriage waiting in front of the royal castle where people were preparing to leave. It was quite noisy.

"To be honest, I was testing you," Prince Irvin stated. I blinked in surprise, and he flashed me a self-deprecating smile. "I believe that my brother is the right person to be the next king of Maldura, even if he goes against my wishes. Even if he decided to fight against my motherland, which my mother protected even after her existence was erased. Even if he declared war against Sauslind."

I also remembered that night in the blizzard. As a prince of Maldura, Prince Irvin had declared that he would not hesitate to fight if his position changed. The reason he had felt so anxious then was that he had still been uncertain.

And that was what I had thought before, when I learned about the conflict between Queen Amalia and His Majesty the King. I wondered what I would do if Prince Christopher was set on going to war, no matter how much I tried to stop him.

"However..." Prince Irvin's voice brightened. "When someone tries to make a decision that you don't like, you do whatever it takes to stop him. Even if you have to do it by force, like with Jean."

I felt embarrassed when Prince Irvin laughed. The smokescreen that had stopped Jean was still in the testing stage and was a little lacking in improvements. As the old saying went, failure was the foundation of success.

He laughed again, as if reading my mind, and said, "I have a lot to learn from you. If my brother and Maldura try to head down a path I don't want, which will lead to our dark history repeating itself, then I'll stop him with force. I'll carry on those feelings that my mother left behind. I will not turn the land I love into a battlefield. I'll be like a ladybird protecting the Eidel flower."

I couldn't help but smile. Ever since I had met Prince Irvin at the

Autumn Hunting Festival, he had helped me and encouraged me so many times. If it hadn't been for him, perhaps I wouldn't be here now. That thought crossed my mind, but I forced it away as I stared back into his black eyes.

"I still want to kidnap you. I'm not lying," he said, his gaze piercing. Those inviting black eyes; that unfamiliar, foreign scent; that seductive gaze that revealed the culture, customs, and lifestyle of an unknown country. He had done so much for me, yet there was nothing I could do to personally repay him. It was painful, to the point where I felt as if I were suffocating. Nevertheless, I returned his gaze and slowly shook my head.

He quietly took a deep breath, as if he had expected that response. "I wanted to take you out of high society, to the sea and the unknown countries beyond."

Goodness. I suppressed the pain in my chest and smiled back at him. "Lord Irvin, will you jump out into that world, write a book, and tell me about it?"

Prince Irvin's eyes went wide, then he laughed. I scored a point on him.

When I turned my gaze back to him with a smile, his typical grin was back. Then he bent down and whispered in my ear, "The look on your face when you hold back your tears is so adorable it makes me want to pin you down."

My breath caught in my throat. Prince Irvin continued to tease me, even though the blood rose to my cheeks.

"When we rode on horseback together, I embraced you many times. Although you're very slender, you're still soft in all the right places..."

"L-Lord Irvin?!" I was speechless.

I then heard Lord Glen cry from behind me, "Whoa... Stop it, Chris! Don't try to take my sword! Calm down!"

Um, Your Highness? I looked back in a hurry, and Prince Irvin laughed cheerfully in front of me. It was time to say goodbye, as Glen screamed in the background, "Don't forget we're in the royal palace!"

Epilogue

It was an unusual sight for Alexei's subordinates to come and go from His Highness's office. Reports of the situation from various places were waiting to be sorted through, including many issues that still needed to be settled and a number of new arrangements that had not yet been completed.

Originally, I was supposed to work from my own private room in the royal palace, but because His Highness had said, "Stay here," with a smile, the court ladies who accompanied me were also coming in and out of his study.

Naturally, many of the reports to His Highness were related to illness, and I was also listed as the person in charge of handling them, so with me here, we didn't have to deal with sorting through duplicate reports.

Prince Theodore, who was gathering evidence about Duke Odin in the port town of Kelk, would be heading straight to the Ralshen Region, which was the most worrisome area. He was going to meet Bernard, the younger brother of His Majesty the King—Theo's uncle. I was sad that I wouldn't be able to pay him a visit as well.

Being confronted by someone who was haunted by suspicions about their own birth... No matter the decision, I was worried about Prince Theodore, but His Highness disinterestedly expressed his opinion while handling the paperwork.

"My uncle has finally gotten off his backside to enjoy his own spring. It's nothing for you to worry about, Eli. He'll be going to pay a visit to Lady Rosalia too, so I'm sure he'll be getting a piece of her mind as well."

Lady Rosalia was Alexei's mother and Prince Theodore's older sister. In the end, after we heard about her condition, I had come home alone without even seeing her face. Alexei wouldn't be able to come back to the palace for the time being due to his mother's health and the arrangements that needed to be made in the Ralshen Region. I heard that Lilia and Mabel were also helping the sick.

I'd like to visit Ralshen again, I thought.

Just then, the prince called my name, seemingly reading my thoughts. "You won't be going anywhere for quite some time." His tone was so firm I knew he wouldn't take no for an answer.

Glen, who was helping sort out the documents beside me, also agreed. "It's because the investigation into the rest of the duke's subordinates and the Shadows isn't finished yet. Plus, there's the matter of the pro-war faction. You'll have to stay here for a while,

Lady Elianna.” He then paused for a moment. “I think I’ve forgotten something...”

All of a sudden there was a commotion outside, and we heard a bright voice say, “Excuse me!” Glen must have judged that this person was not a threat, because he didn’t move as a young lady rushed into the room.

“Chris! Why didn’t you come pick me up when things were settled? I was in big trouble because the duke’s lackeys said, ‘We’re going to exchange you for the duke!’”

Goodness! My eyes widened at the sight of her. Her hat, which had hidden her hair, was all torn up, and her clothes were all disheveled as if she had been running around. She seemed to have a close relationship with His Highness too. Could this be the beginning of a new battle for me?

“Oh!” Glen clapped his hands, remembering what he’d forgotten. Meanwhile, His Highness’s adorable face was twitching.

As soon as the young lady saw me, she cried “Lady Elianna!” and came running over with a bright expression on her face. “I’m so glad you’re safe! I thought you’d be fine, but sometimes Prince Chris can be a real dolt. This battle was really too much, even if I was in charge of it...” she grumbled.

I couldn’t help but blink at her. I wondered if her rough way of speaking was in vogue lately among young women.

She clasped her hands to her chest, looking shocked. “What? I only just left your side for a moment, but you forgot me?!”

I’d heard about a very popular scam overseas where someone would pretend to be someone’s relative to get money out of them. Was this one of those scams?

The young lady in front of me looked very sad and murmured, “It’s me, Alan...”

“What?!” I immediately rose to my feet and studied the figure in front of me again. *Alan?* No matter how I looked at him, all I could see was a cute young lady.

“This outfit...”

“Ha ha... It’s okay. This is proof that my disguise was perfect. Not only did Chris forget about me, but my friends did too! But it’s okay. I did my best. I did my best.”

I felt very sorry for Lord Alan, who was comforting himself by saying that over and over again. When we’d said goodbye after he told me that His Highness had a plan, so many things had happened that I just forgot. No—that was just making excuses.

His Highness continued to sort through the paperwork with an exasperated look on his face. “I sent five Black Wing Knights with you.”

“They were arrested along with me! You’re so cruel, Chris! I’m going to be seeking hazard pay for this!” Lord Alan declared.

His Highness simply replied that he couldn’t move even a single dora from the extra budget, but Lord Alan would not give up, saying that he would even accept it as a loan and that the interest would be eleven percent. He began to cause quite the spectacle, shouting, “Is His Highness so busy that he has become an immoral loan shark?!”

I could feel that life in Sauslind was returning to normal.

The sun was just beginning to set. We still had a lot of work to do, but His Highness told us to take a break, and everyone did so. They all left the office so that we could have some time alone together. We sat side by side as usual, with endless things to talk about.

When I’d heard that Lord Alan had been acting as a decoy for me, I’d felt even more sorry for him. On the day that I met His Highness again at the temple, he had deliberately gone out at dusk to meet Lord Alan, who was staying in a nearby town. Because the duke’s minions had seen them there, the duke had thought he was on the cusp of victory.

His Highness explained, “I certainly couldn’t put a woman in danger.”

I felt I owed Lord Alan even more of an apology than before.

“That day,” he continued, “I actually didn’t think I would be able to see you. I didn’t know where the duke’s minions were hiding, but I just had to see you with my own eyes to make sure you were safe.” He looked at me with a sweet smile. “And by coincidence, I saw you walking toward me. I thought it was fate, Eli. We’re connected by a very strong bond.”

When His Highness took my hand and gently kissed me, my heart skipped a beat. He smiled, then changed the subject back to business matters.

“I received a report from Alex. It seems the Strasser family’s maid, Mabel, has decided to use this incident as an opportunity to become a full-fledged doctor. When we consider the future, I don’t want Dr. Harvey being the one giving your examinations. It might be a good idea to bring her on as the palace’s female doctor.”

Mabel’s going to become a doctor! I thought about my experiences with her on the way to and in the Ralshen Region. I wanted to tell him about every event that had happened.

“Gene Arman, the girl who made the cure... The report said she was the great-granddaughter of Furness Alkemy, who wrote the Fura’s Jar research journal.”

“Yes,” I said, and told him about Lady Gene. Even I, who had dabbled in specialized knowledge, knew that she possessed an

amazing talent.

"I would like her to meet Nigel and the people of the Palace Pharmacy. If she shares her knowledge with them, I'm sure many new medicines will be developed."

Then that might bring a ray of hope to people who were currently suffering from other diseases.

"But..." I trailed off. I could easily imagine that her grandmother, Dr. Hester, would not like it. Would she entrust another one of her relatives to the royal palace again after losing her son? Besides, I didn't think Lady Gene would comply with the request if it meant leaving Dr. Hester, who was suffering from heart disease.

His Highness pondered over this for a moment. "That's right. What if you became the sponsor? I can make that recommendation."

"Me?" I asked with surprise, and he nodded.

"If someone from the Bernstein family would take over, I think Dr. Hester would be relieved."

His Highness said that the rest should be decided by the two of them.

"And about Jean..."

Even though we said we were taking a break, we were still talking about business. I sat up straight in my chair and waited for word of Jean's punishment, but His Highness gave a wry chuckle. "He will be removed from the Shadows. It seems he has chosen you as his mistress, so he can no longer be used as a Shadow of the royal family. As long as your father agrees, he should be hired back into the Bernstein family."

I breathed a sigh of relief. Glen had told me a bit about what had happened afterward with the exchange between Orphen and Jean. He'd told me not to worry, that it was nothing more than a fight between a parent and a child.

"Eli..." His Highness said suddenly. "Did Irvin seduce you?"

"What?!" I exclaimed, tensing up.

He had a smile on his face, but his eyes weren't smiling as he leaned over next to me. "I don't mind if he helped you with things *in my place*. He did save you, didn't he? That's different from trying to seduce you, though."

"No, um..." I pulled away from him and backed into the sofa's armrest. At that point, His Highness grabbed the edge of the armrest and trapped me where I sat.

"Eli," he said. His voice was gentle, but I could tell he meant business. "How did he seduce you? Don't tell me he did things to you that only I'm allowed to do?"

Your Highness, you are downright terrifying! I was driven into a corner, and my thoughts spun rapidly. I blurted out the first thing that

came to mind.

“Well, what about you and Lady Pharmia?!”

“What?” This time it was His Highness’s turn to tense up.

I stared back at him firmly. “I understand that the people of Duke Odin’s faction spread rumors to solidify Lady Pharmia’s position, but, as Prince Reglisse said, what we understand and what actually happened is another matter.”

I kept staring at him, and he seemed to flinch a little. I thought that was suspicious, but when I continued glaring at him, he finally said, “Fine,” and relaxed. He raised his hands in a gesture of peace.

“I know nothing happened between you and him, so I want you to believe that nothing happened between me and Lady Pharmia as well.”

Those rumors made me boiling angry, and His Highness seemed filled with malice for Prince Irvin, but I didn’t know how serious he was about it. At any rate, I let out a little sigh to suppress my feelings. And now was the time to ask him what I was worried about.

“What will happen to Lady Pharmia?”

“Well...” His Highness nodded, choosing his words very carefully. “She had nothing to do with the duke’s crimes, but society will hold her accountable for her father’s actions, regardless. I received a confidential inquiry from the head priestess. She wants Lady Pharmia sent to a temple far away from the capital so she can be kept in their custody.”

When my eyes went wild, His Highness gave me a wry smile.

“Therese has repeatedly requested to meet with her. ‘Please let me visit as her friend,’ she said. However, such meetings cannot be allowed.”

I let out a sigh, trying to suppress the pain in my heart. It was highly likely that Lady Pharmia would lose her rank as a noble, but Lady Therese would never abandon her. Even if I wasn’t at that same point myself yet in regards to Lady Pharmia, perhaps I would be someday.

I once again held in my heart what I’d thought at that time, words that someone in the Pharmacy Lab had said. “This is the only medicine that can be prescribed to the human heart: the medicine of time.”

It might have been selfish of me to think this, because only Lady Pharmia could make all those decisions, but only time would be enough to heal the violent emotions and wounds in her heart. I wanted to dream of a future in which the three of us could laugh together while reminiscing about the past. Even if it was impossible now—perhaps someday.

I clasped my hands in prayer, and His Highness covered them

with his. "Eli," he said with his familiar warm and gentle smile. "Shall we talk about our future?"

I blinked in surprise and repeated, "Our future?"

His Highness nodded. "The recent events made me realize many things. In today's world, old customs aren't everything. If you get caught up in them, you might end up making yourself vulnerable to hostile forces. To prevent that, you need something solid."

"Solid?" I was confused because I didn't know what he meant by that, but His Highness grabbed my hand and leaned out again.

"What will grow between you and I—the crystallization of our love, Eli."

"Right," I breathed, and when I saw His Majesty's beautiful face come close enough to touch me, I belatedly understood what he meant. I saw myself blushing in the reflection of his blue eyes.

"W-W-Wait, Your Highness!"

"Mm," he hummed, not listening to me as he touched my cheek, then the other. A tiny, faint scar had been left on that cheek, and I felt something warm touch it. Next, he pressed his lips to my temples, the corners of my eyes, my brow, and my forehead. Every time he touched me, I could feel his warmth and love in his kisses. It was like he was impressing his love on me with every touch, with an unspoken passion that said "I love you," just like he had that one time. It was a feeling that awakened the heat within me.

When I had reunited with His Highness, I'd felt the full strength of my desire to never be apart from him again, but I had managed to use the last bit of my resistance to push him away.

"I-I think customs and traditions are important!"

His lips were just about to touch mine, but then they abruptly stopped. His blue eyes smiled mischievously as he breathed, "I was so close."

"To what?" I could see my tense expression in the reflection in his eyes.

With a bitter smile, His Highness sat up. "But...you're right. I want to love you even more, Eli. I don't want to get caught up in the heat of the moment. I want to cherish you properly." Both the hand that touched my cheek and the look in his eyes were gentle enough to convey his thoughts. Even the voice that called my name felt irreplaceable.

"Thank you for coming back to me. I'll never let you go, so prepare yourself."

I was still swept away by his sweet words and my throbbing heart. "Yes," I answered. "Thank you for believing in me and waiting for me, Your Highness. Prince Christopher... I love you."

His eyes widened. "You got me right in the heart," he said,

covering his face for a moment and turning away. It looked like his cheeks were slightly red. Usually I was the only one who blushed, and a giggle welled up inside me when I thought it served him right for a change.

“Eli, you were only gone for a short time. Who taught you how to do that?”

In fact, Lady Rosalia had taught me some secrets during the trip—on how to keep your gentleman—and this was my first victory. When I smiled to myself, thinking that her experience and teachings were correct, Prince Christopher removed his hand from his face, revealing a dangerous expression.

“I think I might need to interrogate you about all of the events that happened on your trip...”

“No. Please have mercy on me,” I said with a smile.

His hand traced my cheek as he smiled back at me. “Well, there’s still plenty of time left,” he said.

I blushed once more, and as he smiled softly at me again, his blue eyes shining, the gap between us closed. He whispered something affectionately to me before his lips brushed against mine, but more deeply and more lovingly than the time before: “My dearest Bibliophile Princess.”



Afterword

It's been a long time. This is the author, Yui.

I was finally able to deliver the conclusion to the *Bibliophile Princess* conspiracy arc. I'd like to apologize to you for waiting so long. After I wrote volume 5, an unimaginable global pandemic occurred. I honestly was troubled about whether I should continue writing this story, and my heart broke over and over again.

Even so, I continued receiving warm messages from my readers saying, "We're waiting," so I was able to write it with my eyes fixed on the end. I don't know if you'll like it, but I hope you enjoy it even a little.

This time, I wanted to write as if it were the end, and I was surprised at the amount I wrote. The number of lines that fit on one page is amazing. I'm really sorry if it's hard to read. Thank you very much to the editorial department for listening to my selfish requests.

I have some amazing news to share with you this time. It has already been announced, but I am so fortunate to tell you that *Bibliophile Princess* will be adapted into an anime. I was really surprised when I heard the news.

Characters and stories that were born inside of me have now been read across the world. I think this is all thanks to the readers who have supported this work. Thank you very much. And thank you very much to the proofreaders, the editorial department, and the editors who cooperated in delivering this work to everyone.

To the illustrator Sheena-sensei, thank you for listening to my unreasonable requests. To Kikuta-sensei, who is in charge of the manga adaptation, I am always fascinated by your wonderful *Bibliophile Princess*.

I would also like to thank my family and friends for their support, and most of all, to my readers. Thanks to you, I am able to do my best. Please continue to support *Bibliophile Princess*.

I hope we can meet again.

Yui



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Bibliophile Princess: Volume 6
by Yui

Translated by Alyssa Niioka and Andria McKnight
Edited by Suzanne Seals

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Publication rights for this English edition arranged through
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Ebook edition 1.0: March 2023